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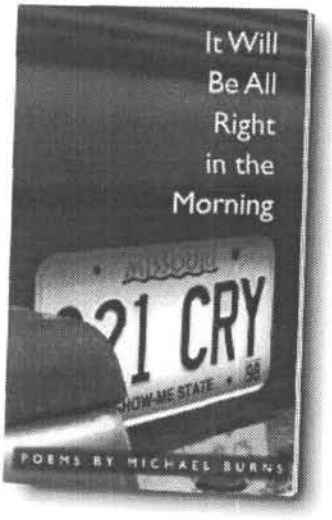

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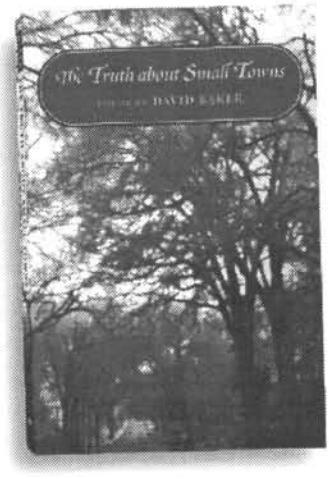

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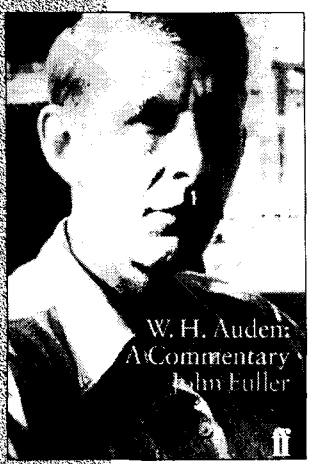

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A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

Two new books by Advisory Editors of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, they will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

HAYDEN CARRUTH: *Reluctantly: Autobiographical Essays.* Copper Canyon Press. $16.00 paperback.

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD: *Talking Back to Emily Dickinson, and Other Essays.* University of Massachusetts Press. $29.95.

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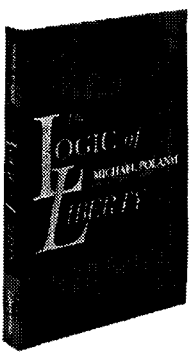

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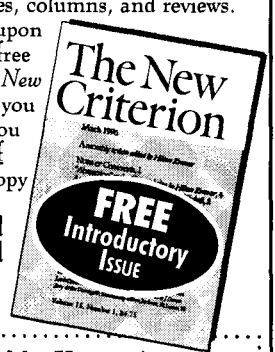

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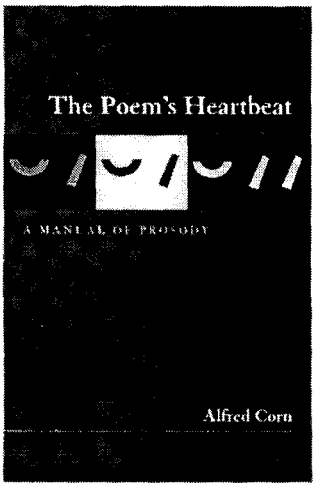

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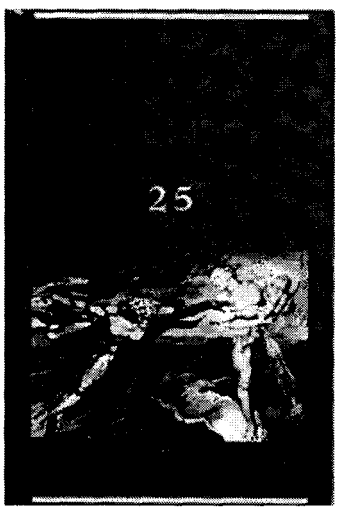

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JOHN WEIGHTMAN

The Lure of Unreason

It is not often that a serious intellectual debate starts from a joke, but this has been the case with the "Sokal Controversy," which began in 1996. The reader may remember that Alan Sokal, a theoretical physicist at New York University, being both amused and exasperated by the inaccurate use of scientific terminology on the part of "post-modernist" sociologists and other non-scientific theoreticians, composed a spoof article—ponderously labelled "Transgressing the Boundaries, Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity"—liberally salted it with pseudoscientific assertions culled from various sources and submitted it to the journal *Social Text*, where it was duly published without a quibble. Shortly afterwards, in the review *Lingua Franca*, he revealed the hoax as an attempt to debunk the obscure and pretentious lucubrations which pass for original thought in certain fashionable areas of speculation.[1]

The joke didn't work as well as it might have done, perhaps because Sokal, a reputable figure in his own field, could be accused of having unfairly laid the burden of detecting the spoof on the unsuspecting editors of *Social Text*. But now, in *Impostures intellectuelles*, written in collaboration with a professor of physics at the University of Louvain in Belgium, he has brought his attack on the misuse of scientific terminology out into the open, and very formidable it is.[2] It raises a fundamental question of intellectual procedure of importance to scientists and non-scientists alike.

Why, you may ask, has the book appeared in French, but not yet in English?[3] The reason is, no doubt, that it concentrates on a

[1] See "Sokal's Hoax," by Stephen Weinberg, *The New York Review of Books*, August 8, 1996; also "My Science Wars," by Harold Fromm, *The Hudson Review*, Volume XLIX, No. 4 (Winter 1997).

[2] IMPOSTURES INTELLECTUELLES, by *Alan Sokal* and *Jean Bricmont*. Editions Odile Jacob. 140F.

[3] Since I wrote this, a version has appeared in England and will be published in the U.S. in November as *Fashionable Nonsense* (Picador, $23.00).

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number of French intellectuals, some of whom have had a marked influence on post-modernism in the English-speaking world; Sokal/Bricmont may have felt it appropriate to criticize them first on their home ground and in their own language. I presume that Bricmont's native language is French and that he wielded the pen or manipulated the laptop. Surprisingly, the book seems to have created only a slight flurry in France, but not the rumpus one might have expected. Perhaps the consequences of taking it seriously were too painful to be contemplated. Like a previous celebrated pamphlet, *La Trahison des clercs* (1927) by Julien Benda, it is a sharp indictment of a particular area of French intellectual life in the name of a universal principle. Benda's target was the chauvinist sentiment and narrowly materialistic attitudes of certain contemporary writers, and he raised a storm because he was both French and Jewish and the memory of the Dreyfus Affair was still relatively fresh in the public mind. Like him, Sokal/Bricmont are defending a vital principle of thought, but their strictures can be more easily disregarded because neither of them is French. However to me, a lifelong Francophil, their book has come like a breath of fresh air, since it helps to clarify a problem that has bothered me for a long time.

The problem is: why, in the late twentieth century—and in a fortunately limited but well-publicized area—has French culture, once renowned for its clarity, developed such a tendency to obscurity, hermetic preciosity and wilful irrationalism? The phenomenon, which has puzzled a number of foreign observers, is odd enough in France itself, but it has also had a disturbing effect abroad. Despite the decline in the international importance of the French language, Parisian intellectual fashions still filter through to the English-speaking world, mainly by way of academia. As a result, these fashions catch on in the universities, even among people who have no knowledge of the original French texts. This would not matter so much if the texts were translatable in the ordinary sense of the word; "translations" often exist, of course, but since the originals are for the most part densely cryptic, the renderings do little more than pile ambiguity upon ambiguity.

To quote an extreme example: the writings of the psychoanalyst, the late Jacques Lacan, one of the intellectuals taken to task by Sokal/Bricmont, are not only notoriously opaque—the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, by general consent no mean brain,

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is on record as saying that he found them incomprehensible—they depend so much on wordplay and arbitrary distortions of vocabulary that they are inseparable from the arcane French in which they were composed. Yet I have been told that there are university departments where Lacan is studied solely in English; if this is true, one wonders what goes on in such classes.

I have personal experience of another example. My first serious encounter with the problem occurred in the eighties, when *Les Mots et les choses*, the best-known work by the late Michel Foucault, a social historian and a professor at the Collège de France, was put on the London University French syllabus. It amazed me by its lack of any logical sequence of thought, its gratuitous assertions and its frequent recourse to dubious rhetoric. After struggling with it for a long time, I was moved to write an article entitled "On Not Understanding Michel Foucault,"[4] in which I demonstrated, at least to my own satisfaction, that the so-called *archéologie du savoir*, the new discipline put forward by Foucault, had no basis in reality, because his key concept of *l'épistémès* (a sort of collective mind-set below the level of consciousness, which—so he argued—has changed some three or four times in the course of European history) could be given no reliable meaning. I concluded that, for some reason, perhaps a desire to appear original at any cost, Foucault was distorting the history of ideas since the Enlightenment and, moreover, doing so in an unnecessarily convoluted style that had to be laboriously unravelled before its meaning, or lack of meaning, could be determined. The article prompted some expressions of agreement, but also, significantly, a letter of abuse from a French academic, as if, in openly expressing my perplexity, I had violated some taboo outside the domain of rational argument.

Since then, of course, Foucault has been subjected to a lot of criticism by other disappointed readers, but *l'archéologie du savoir* still seems to be taken seriously in certain quarters, and Foucault's other speculations about madness, power and sexuality, although just as elusively worded, have excited a lot of attention, precisely, perhaps, through their rather feverish imprecision.

Foucault is mentioned only incidentally—although very unfa-

[4] *The American Scholar*, Summer 1989.

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vorably—in *Impostures intellectuelles*, but he is part of the trend with which Sokal/Bricmont are concerned, because he shares some of the characteristics of the eight individuals they single out for special treatment. These are: Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Bruno Latour, Luce Irigaray, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Paul Virilio. They are all what one might call "general" intellectuals at the same time as they have their special interests—psychology, literary theory, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, etc. What unites them is their common interest in science and their habit of using mathematical or scientific terminology in support, or illustration, of their speculations in fields other than science proper.

It seems that, for the most part, they simply get their mathematics or their science wrong. They have taken the trouble to study the subjects up to a certain point, and they handle the technical terms confidently, as if they knew what they were talking about, but it is frequently impossible to tell whether their mathematical or scientific references are to be taken literally or metaphorically and, in either case, they may be both inaccurate and inapposite. The result is a strange kind of writing, a sort of high-flown confusion—one might call it the Higher Nonsense—such as has probably never existed before in this form in the French language.

In each case, Sokal/Bricmont take extracts from the works of the writers mentioned and subject them to detailed analysis, with what seems to be devastating effect. Having no specialist competence in this area, I cannot judge their arguments directly, but the two authors inspire me with confidence, because their approach is eminently rational throughout and enlivened by humor rather than righteous indignation.

Besides, the world of theoretical physics is often said to be a global village, so that, had their criticisms been unfounded, some French physicist would presumably have come forward to defend the national honor. As far as I know, this has not happened; it follows that the indictment contained in *Impostures intellectuelles* remains essentially unanswered.

I briefly summarize the case for the prosecution, taking each writer in turn. Lacan, who had a jackdaw mind, tried to introduce all sorts of extraneous influences into Freudianism, from Lévi-

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Strauss's Structuralism to Joycean multilingual punning, but it is his abundant use of analogies between mathematics and psychology that Sokal/Bricmont find unacceptable, since these analogies "are as arbitrary as they possibly could be, and he [Lacan] gives no empirical or conceptual justification for them."

A typical passage concerns the psychoanalytical role of imaginary numbers (itself, say Sokal/Bricmont, imaginary in the non-mathematical, everyday sense of the word); after a long build-up, Lacan arrives at the conclusion that the penis has an equivalence with the square root of minus one. I translate as best I can:

> Thus it is that the erectile organ comes to symbolize the place of *jouissance* (pleasure, orgasm) not in itself as penis, not even as an image, but as a missing part of the desired image: that is why it can be equated with $\sqrt{-1}$ of the signification demonstrated above, of the *jouissance* that, by the coefficient of its formulation, it reinstates in its function as lack of signifier: (-1).

It occurs to me that this may be a hermetic flourish on the rueful theme of the intermittency of our erectile organ, which always comes to rest in negativity: repose, tumescence, *jouissance*, repose, *omne animal post coitum*. . . . But, whatever Lacan's intended meaning, the passage is a weird pseudo-mathematical conceit rather than a contribution to thought. And the same applies to a greater or lesser extent to the extracts from the works of the other writers under examination.

Kristeva, in dealing with various areas of speculation, such as poetics and psychology, makes a wealth of mathematical references, to such an extent, indeed, that some of her writings must remain a closed book for any reader not conversant with mathematical symbols. But strange as this may seem, they also remain a closed book for these two professors of mathematics, who go through several long quotations, plucking out howlers like currants out of a pudding. They conclude:

> One can see that, in general, she has at least a vague idea of the mathematics to which she refers, even if she obviously doesn't always understand the meaning of the terms she uses. But the main problem raised by these texts is that she gives no justification whatever of the relevance of the mathematical concepts in the various fields she claims to be studying . . . and, in our opinion, for the very good reason that there is none.

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Irigaray, incidentally of Belgian origin, is another polymath with a gnomic prose style, but her central intellectual position at least is clear, and so all the more open to question. She is a feminist who asserts that science being predominantly a masculine affair, and men being identified with solidity and women with fluidity, fluid mechanics remain underdeveloped in comparison with solid mechanics (not true, say Sokal/Bricmont). She further maintains that even pure mathematics has a sexual bias and then, going the whole hog, she decrees that science being "masculine," there can be no belief in "a truth independent of the subject," and advises women:

> . . . not to subscribe to, or accept, the existence of a neutral, universal science to which women should painfully seek access and through which they oppress both themselves and other women by transforming science into a new superego.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of this statement, which dooms the sexes to eternal intellectual separation, would be to say that water boils, or should boil, at a different temperature, according to whether the kettle is switched on by the husband or the wife. As Sokal/Bricmont comment:

> To link rationality and objectivity with men and subjectivity and emotivity with women is to reinstate the worst clichés of machismo.

Latour deals with the sociology of science, and his fundamental concern—if I have grasped the central point behind Sokal/Bricmont's extremely technical discussion—is to argue, rather like Irigaray, but naturally without her feminist leaning, that there is no ultimate scientific objectivity, because, in the last resort, everything depends on the observer, with the result that "the content of a science is social through and through." He supports this contention by reference to the role of the observer as discussed by Einstein in connection with the theory of relativity. However, according to Sokal/Bricmont, he has misunderstood a vital link in the theory. This does not prevent him expressing himself with supreme self-confidence:

> . . . the opinions of scientists about science studies are not of much importance. Scientists are the informants in our investigations into science and not our judges.

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But, ask Sokal/Bricmont, "what is one to think of an 'investigator,' who doesn't understand what his 'informants' are telling him?"

Whereas Lacan has a weakness for imaginary numbers and Kristeva for group theory, Baudrillard juggles with Euclidean and non-Euclidean space as a source of sociological metaphors, which Sokal/Bricmont find very doubtful, to say the least. But they reserve their main attack for his treatment of the concept of chance in relation to science and to society at large. Starting from Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which he defines as "hyperrationality," he goes on to claim that science "not satisfied simply to question the deterministic principle of causality . . . now intuits the existence not only of uncertainty, but of a probable *reversibility* of physical laws." He adds that such a hypothesis has always been present in "the great metaphysical systems" and that it is fascinating to see science arriving at similar possibilities "so contrary to its own logic and procedure." Sokal/Bricmont puncture this speculative flight by explaining that Baudrillard has misunderstood the technical sense of "reversibility," which does not involve science in hypotheses "contrary to its own logic and procedure."

Deleuze, a philosopher, and Guattari, a psychologist, are taken in tandem, since they wrote some of their books together, in particular, *Qu'est-ce-que la philosophie?* which, amongst other things, attempts to define the difference between philosophy and science. It was apparently a bestseller in France in 1991, although it must have been bought largely as a social sign of cultural standing, like a coffee-table book, since the text is as awesomely difficult as anything by Lacan or Kristeva, and well beyond the scope of any general reader. Again Sokal/Bricmont give liberal quotations with a running commentary. In connection with one particularly long passage, packed with scientific references, they dryly remark:

> In this extract there are at least twelve scientific terms [which they list], used without any apparent logic, and the text oscillates between nonsense (*"une fonction est une Ralentie"*) and banalities (*"la science ne cesse de promouvoir des accélérations"*).

They are no less scathing about Virilio, an architect and town planner, and another eager borrower from the vocabulary of physics, and especially the theory of relativity. He compounds his

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errors by occasionally quoting from English language sources, which he mistranslates. Moreover, he invents a pseudoscientific term of his own, *"l'espace dromosphérique"*:

> Let us recall here that *dromospheric space*, speed-space, is physically described by what is called "the logistic equation" the result of the product of the mass displaced by the speed of its displacement (MxV).

Once again, the professors rap an unreliable student over the knuckles:

> The logistic equation is a differential equation studied in the biological theory of population (amongst other contexts). It . . . was introduced by the mathematician Verhulst (1838). It has no connection with MxV. . . . MxV doesn't figure in the mechanics of relativity. *Dromospheric space* is a Virilian invention.

There is much more in *Impostures intellectuelles* than I have been able to indicate, but the above quotations will no doubt suffice to illustrate what an extraordinary intellectual phenomenon Sokal/Bricmont have put their finger on. This cult of vacuous obscurity adorned with pseudoscientific references is, as I have said, a fashion, inaugurated by a few leading figures and copied by many minor adepts. Unfortunately, fashion, which plays such an important part in all human activities, has not yet found its Newton or its Darwin. As Sokal's original hoax showed, even sociology is more influenced by it than capable of explaining it. Why should a body of intellectuals take a disastrously amateur interest in science and commit themselves to incomprehensible and dogmatic disquisitions above the head of the general reader, and—what is more extraordinary still—in a sense above their own heads?

Since the phenomenon is primarily linguistic, it has some parallels with earlier fashions, such as the *trobar clus* of the troubadours, Euphuism, Gongorism and the seventeenth-century *salon* preciosity that Molière made fun of in *Les Précieuses ridicules*. Preciosity, in general, needs no defense, because it is often a charmingly imaginative form of wordplay. But there is no charm in these texts, and the linguistic fashion they represent verges on a linguistic disease; it jeopardizes the process of rationality both in scientific thought and in thought in general through the implication that reason itself is no more than an obsolescent fashion,

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now favored only by the unsophisticated, a fashion which can be replaced with advantage by something looser, more governed by individual fantasy.

After commenting at length on these texts, Sokal/Bricmont are surely justified in concluding with what seems to me to be a definitive statement:

> . . . such writing can be evaluated neither as scientific discourse, nor as philosophical argument, nor as poetry. We find ourselves faced, then, by what might be called "secular mysticism"; mysticism because language is being used to produce mental effects which are not purely aesthetic, at the same time as they make no appeal to reason.

In other words, this kind of writing belongs to a hybrid genre, invalid both rationally and imaginatively. Since it blurs all useful distinctions, it has the further peculiarity that very little can be salvaged from it.

Before leaving this point, I should perhaps emphasize that Sokal/Bricmont are not dogmatic scientists intervening in an area that should properly be reserved for more refined spirits. While in the direct line of descent from eighteenth-century rationalism, they are far from having a narrow, positivistic approach. They go even further than Karl Popper in arguing that scientific knowledge is never final, but only "beyond reasonable doubt" in the current state of play. They stress that the road to scientific knowledge is often by way of accidents, hunches or imaginative leaps, and they warn against the clumsy application of pseudoscientific methodology in contexts not yet reducible to scientific formulation, and which may remain so indefinitely. However, they are perhaps too sanguine in implying that all scientists are as prudently sceptical as they are:

> In the last resort, the scientist is deprived of [*orphelin de*] the absolute but illusory certainties of speculative philosophy. These certainties disappeared in the eighteenth century, and there can be no going back to them [*on n'y reviendra plus*].

Surely, in each new generation, a great many people thirst avidly for these absolute but illusory certainties; no doubt it is "natural" for them to do so. Even some scientists, in unguarded moments, speak metaphysically beyond their brief; cf. Richard Dawkins on

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how Darwinism in its modern form has "solved" the problem of life, and Stephen Hawking on the possibility of man "getting to know the mind of God."

As for the practitioners of the hybrid genre, their behavior must be prompted by some emotion, because to acquire even their defective knowledge of contemporary science and mathematics, they must have labored over original texts or works of vulgarization. They cannot have done so simply to dazzle a gullible public with a wealth of technical terms. I would suggest another possibility, which links up with what Sokal/Bricmont say about secular mysticism.

All these writers seem to be, at least partly, within the post-Enlightenment tradition of rational thought, and they make no overt appeal to religion. They are enormously impressed by the justified prestige of modern science, and they want to appropriate it as far as possible. At the same time, they cannot rest content with scientific knowledge as such; they want to use it—particularly the uncertainty principle and some aspects of the theory of relativity—to reach a pseudo-poetic Beyond or Transcendence. Hence Baudrillard's excitement about "reversibility" and his approving reference to "the great metaphysical systems," and Latour's confidence that his meta-scientific investigation is on a higher plane than scientific knowledge itself. Foucault—if I may refer to him again—shares the same tendency because, in *Les Mots et les choses*, he betrays a nostalgia for a sort of pre-Babelian language which, instead of being an instrument of symbolic representation—i.e., inevitably reductionist—would somehow coincide directly with the reality of Being.

Now, as it happens, since the middle of the nineteenth century at least, there has been in France, despite the continued strength of the Enlightenment tradition, a definite intellectual trend connected with the search for "the absolute certainties of speculative philosophy" in various guises. On the one hand, France, the land of Descartes and the cult of Reason, has always been highly rationalistic, and remains so in most areas; on the other hand, certain intellectuals, without professing any orthodox religious faith, have long had a tendency to identify reason with bourgeois prosiness and conformism, and to consider it as inimical to metaphysical awareness and to the superior faculty of the imagination.

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The history of this prolonged tussle—often in one and the same mind—between reason and the thirst for something beyond reason, is extremely complicated, but I can point to some of the main landmarks. Stephane Mallarmé, a lapsed Catholic, tried "to purify the language of the tribe," so as to create a new, wholly lyrical idiom in which he would compose "The Book," the numinous text of a linguistic religion. He failed, but incidentally produced a few uniquely successful poems, along with others that defy interpretation. (He had a particularly strong influence on Lacan, whose prose is often frankly neo-Mallarméan.) Arthur Rimbaud, an extraordinarily talented youth, who renounced literature at the age of twenty-one, recommended "the systematic derangement of the senses" as a means of releasing the imagination from the restraints of reason. André Breton and his fellow Surrealists advocated "automatic writing" as a way of by-passing reason so as to allow the expression of the supposedly deeper truth of the unconscious. Breton also claimed that there is a mystic point in the mind where all the contradictions of life can be reconciled, although there is no evidence that he or his followers ever attained to it.

Many less generally famous, but nevertheless influential figures belong to this extra-rational or anti-rational tradition: Isidore Ducasse (Lautréamont), Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, etc. There is also a connection with the Theatre of the Absurd as representated by Ionesco and some other practitioners, but not—it is important to note—with the concept of the Absurd, as expounded by Sartre and Camus; their perception of the Absurd depends essentially on their faith in reason. Another aspect of the tradition is the intense modern French interest in the Marquis de Sade and Friedrich Nietzsche, two writers who operated on the borders of insanity.

Naturally, opinions differ about the works produced in this tradition. In my view, they vary greatly in quality and comprise some masterpieces, many valuable insights, but also a considerable amount of delirious verbalism. However, all this output is relevant to our discussion, because it is part of the atmosphere within which the individuals targeted by Sokal/Bricmont were nurtured and which they accept as normal. This may help to explain why, despite their apparently keen interest in science on a certain level, they lack any firm belief in the sort of rational and

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empirical argument on which science is based, and which has also normally prevailed in everyday, non-scientific discourse with no pretensions to metaphysical certainty.

Also relevant to this point is the case of a philosopher of a previous generation, referred to incidentally by Sokal/Bricmont. Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was a fashionable figure around the turn of the century; his lectures were attended by society ladies, and it has been claimed that he influenced the work of Marcel Proust. He had a fundamentally religious approach, which is expressed in the dogmatic statement: "The Universe is a machine for the making of gods" (i.e., out of human beings). He brought modern science into his theorizing, particularly evolutionary theory and the theory of relativity. Apparently, like his modern counterparts, he too misunderstood certain aspects of relativity, a fact that has long been recognized by French scientists, but not by some contemporary French non-scientific intellectuals who treat his erroneous statements with respect, either because they haven't checked with the scientists, or because they automatically assume that Bergsonian thought must be truer in some way than the "soulless" findings of science.

On this issue of checking with the scientists, it seems natural to ask: why do these non-scientific theorists, when they venture into the specialist scientific field, not take the precaution of having their statements vetted by some competent adviser? Here we come up against two further peculiarities of the French scene, one linguistic, the other psychological.

In French, the primary meaning of the word *la science* is "knowledge" in general, and such disciplines as psychology, history and sociology are known as *les sciences humaines*. A consequence of this is that non-scientific intellectuals don't always make a clear distinction between their type of speculation and the "hard" sciences. This is the case, for instance, with Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses*, where he makes generalizations that are meant to cover both types of thought, as if there were no difference between them. Another instance is Émile Zola, who claimed, with apparent sincerity, that in writing his documented, "Naturalist" novels, he was proceeding like an experimental scientist. It follows that Lacan, Kristeva and the others may have assumed that they could borrow freely from mathematics and science through the conviction that all thought is, to use the modern cliché, "a

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level playing field." It is, in the sense that all human brains operate by and large in the same way. However, there is a difference in kind between scientific knowledge, which is concretely and progressively verifiable—and, therefore in its purest form ("beyond reasonable doubt" in the current state of play) personality-free and universal—and all the other modes of thought which, however important, are not yet reducible to such objective formulation. Confusion of the two kinds of thought results in the unproductive hybridization denounced by Sokal/Bricmont. On the one hand, these intellectuals want to re-personalize science or set it in opposition to itself by asserting that it is gender-conditioned, subjectively biased or contradicting its own logic. On the other hand, they borrow imperfectly understood fragments of science seemingly on the mistaken assumption that they will somehow give objective strength to their own essentially subjective theorizing.

As for the psychological issue, it relates to the French tradition of *le maître à penser*. Having been partly educated in France, and having worked for many years as a Frenchman before becoming an English university teacher, I venture the opinion that the French in general have an admirable respect for thought and things of the mind, such as is not to be found in some other countries. But the reverse of the coin is that many of them also tend to have too great a reverence for individual thinkers who, once they have achieved a degree of fame, acquire disciples and become the focus of what one can only call "intellectual groupieism." The chosen preceptor is worshipped as the fountainhead of truth, and this has a corrupting influence on *le maître* himself, who begins to speak too confidently *ex cathedra*, because that is what is expected of him. Consequently, these contemporary *maîtres-à-penser* represent a strange blend of post-modernism with the ancient cult of the charismatic master.

The personalization of thought, so contrary to the true spirit of the Enlightenment, has been particularly noticeable in twentieth-century France. Just as André Breton was dubbed "the Pope of Surrealism," because he demanded absolute loyalty from his devotees and excommunicated heretics, so Lacan could be called the would-be Pope of Freudianism, because he claimed to be the sole authentic interpreter of the Freudian texts; since his death, his "church," not surprisingly, has exploded into different warring sects. These are the two most blatant examples of thought taking

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on the character of a revealed religion, but there are other, more insidious instances. Michel Foucault had his unconditional supporters, Jean-Paul Sartre ruled his particular roost for many years and, in the thirties, the then famous, but now half-forgotten, *maître-à-penser*, Alain, had his dogmatic side, although he was, generally speaking, a wise and decent man. Kristeva, Baudrillard, Deleuze, etc., are, I should say, lesser figures, who are continuing in the same tradition of too confident, subjective assertion.

The word "subjective" needs to be stressed, because the final implication of *Impostures intellectuelles* is not simply that the writers incriminated play fast and loose with mathematics and scientific theory; at the root of the matter is their attitude towards language and the nature of knowledge. In the last resort, what they have in common is a complacently narcissistic use of language, which might be called a form of solipsism, since it doesn't recognize the constraints of the external world and of the general linguistic community on this kind of subjective theorizing. Just as there is a difference of kind between scientific and non-scientific knowledge, there is a difference in kind between imaginative and rational thought, although it is more difficult to define, since the border between them is porous. Sound imaginative thought may be subjective in the first instance, but it is not solipsistic because it broadens human awareness and always allows a rational follow-up. Such is not the case with solipsistic subjectivity.

Sokal/Bricmont deal with solipsism, and do so effectively insofar as it has to be refuted in order to establish the reality of scientific knowledge as being "beyond reasonable doubt" in the present state of play. But there is another, commonsensical approach. It has always seemed to me that any philosopher who seriously doubts the existence of the external world is overlooking the fact that, without the external world, he would have no instrument with which to express his doubt. Language itself is proof of the existence of the external world outside our minds. Babies are born with a voice and an innate linguistic facility but are linguistically mute (infant, *infans*, without the power of speech). The language they eventually acquire is supplied by the society surrounding them, and the simple fact that philosophers belonging to different nations speak different languages reinforces the point about the existence of the external world. Also, although the origin of language in general is lost in the mists of

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time, it is clear that all languages are collective, historical constructs, largely made up of dead metaphors derived from physical contact with the external world. It follows that even the most abstract philosophical argument is ultimately a tissue of such metaphors, once concrete but now diaphanous, and their very diaphaneity may create false problems—such as that of solipsism . . . ?

But the vital point, relevant to the present discussion, is that language is not an inborn, autonomous part of our individuality. In this respect, the term "mother tongue" is misleading, if it is taken to imply that our contact with articulate speech begins in the womb. Language is a *prosthesis* acquired after birth, but it is not an individual possession, like that other, familiar prosthesis that we may require and acquire in old age—a set of false teeth; yet, in an important sense, which may not be immediately obvious to people who speak only one language with which they completely identify, it is just as much an artificial, cultural product as a set of dentures. It is unique in being a *collective prosthesis* that we share with all the other speakers of the same language. The fact that we share it with others automatically involves us in responsibility towards these others; in other words, there is a *morality* of the use of language.

What *Impostures intellectuelles* demonstrates is that the intellectuals criticized have no real sense of linguistic responsibility. Their solipsism consists in assuming that since language bubbles up spontaneously in their minds from within, it belongs inherently to themselves as individuals, and that they alone are adequate guarantors of what they assert. Hence their hit-or-miss treatment of mathematics and science, and their obscurity, which is not pregnant with genuinely difficult meaning but a subjective intellectual maze, leading nowhere, since it is not reliably connected with the main thoroughfare of rational thought.

Yet their existence as a sort of group shows that, paradoxically, even solipsists can combine to create a fashion—a fashion that has lasted now for two or three decades and only recently, perhaps, has begun to lose ground. This seems to indicate that, even in a highly sophisticated society, there can be a reservoir of unreason waiting to be tapped.

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GEORGE WATSON

Iris Murdoch and the Net of Theory

Critical theory was an attempt to philosophize the study of literature. It is perhaps surprising, then, that it used philosophy so little.

The boldest and most honorable exception in our times, at least in English, has been Iris Murdoch. She had an eminent advantage. She began her professional life as an academic philosopher, and her very first book, in 1953, was a study of another philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre. By then she was already writing novels, and in 1954 she had one published, called *Under the Net.*

At that point, in her mid-thirties, she was a teaching Fellow of an Oxford college, at a moment when a number of British academics were turning, a little improbably, to the writing of fiction. She married soon after, abandoned teaching, and wrote a vast stream of novels, none of them short, to become more or less the most prolific English novelist of any critical reputation in her generation. The move to fiction may have been as much tactical, however, as principled. She never stopped philosophizing, though in her middle years her philosophical works were essays or short collections of essays like *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and *The Fire and the Sun* (1977), which is all about Plato. More recently, after another spate of fiction, the emphasis has shifted back; *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) has had a success even a novelist would envy, and it is much too long to be called an essay. So her career in authorship, which is unique, has an interesting shape—not just deliberate, one may dare to imagine, but deliberated. She has run fiction and philosophy in tandem for nearly half a century, and only she knows which started first. Though she avoids reading the novels of her contemporaries, which make her feel uncomfortable, she has always been a deep student of classic European fiction like Stendhal, Dickens and Tolstoy. And giving up Oxford, where her husband John Bayley

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was a professor of English and another novelist, has never meant giving up philosophy.

She still insists, however, that she is not a philosophical novelist, and it is certain she has never written what is commonly called a philosophical novel—anything like Voltaire's *Candide*, say, or Kafka's *The Trial*, or Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, where characters exist as puppets governed by a preordained meaning. These are what she calls crystalline novels, as opposed to journalistic, and her own novels have always been journalistic: long, flowing, emotionally involving and often, like *The Unicorn* (1963), haunting and mysterious. Nor does she believe, in any simple sense, that metaphysics is a guide to morals, though the title of her big book might suggest that she does. So she is a philosopher-novelist who denies herself the title of a philosophical novelist. There is a good deal to unravel here.

Before unravelling Iris Murdoch as a critical theorist, it might be an idea to stand back and consider why people have been attracted in large numbers to theory in our times.

There is more than one reason, I suspect, even if you leave out those that hardly bear thinking about, like needing a terminology to look clever in—there is always a big demand for that—or indulging a desire to look fashionable, or finding easy ways to dismiss inconvenient evidence. Two respectable reasons remain, and they both apply to what Iris Murdoch has achieved. One might be called the Marilyn Factor. Marilyn Monroe, it is said, was once found on a film set between takes reading an encyclopaedia, and explained, "I just wanted to know what people were referring to." That sounds sensible. Iris Murdoch's novels and essays satisfy a similar taste. They have encouraged a lot of non-philosophers to believe that they now know a little more about what philosophers have been doing; and her chief educative function, paradoxically, may have begun after she stopped teaching.

The other reason is more austerely philosophical, in the original sense of the word, and it concerns the seeking and finding of truth. In that sense Iris Murdoch has always been a philosophical writer. She is, if I may so put it, sincere. The word is so unfashionable that it may sound repellent or at best ridiculous, especially when applied to a novelist or academic philosopher, but I can think of nothing better. Her writings

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seldom descend into mere cleverness, though she is a clever woman. In fiction and moral philosophy alike, she is plainly animated by a profound sense of caring about getting a right answer and persuading others to care too, as if it would matter for the better if one could be found, *and not just for philosophers*, and matter for the worse if it could not. She makes moral philosophy sound as if it counts. Even her aphorisms are deep-felt rather than merely smart. At the end of *The Sovereignty of Good*, for example, she remarks that "the humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are." That is touching as well as penetrative. Philosophy, Wittgenstein once remarked, leaves the world as it is. Perhaps it does. But that is not an impression one would carry away from reading her books.

Nor is sincerity a commonplace property, nowadays, among novelists. This is a clever age. Most recent novelists of any literary standing have been clever, often immensely so, and in a post-utopian age that means the denial of certitude. What, if anything, do we truly know? In *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), for example, Julian Barnes has called history a greasy piglet, meaning that you cannot securely hold on to any claim to know the past—or the present, for that matter. Moral knowledge, especially, is not knowledge at all, in that view, merely personal opinion; and Barnes's most successful novel, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), promises in its very title whimsy and nothing but whimsy. He has been heard to call himself an agnostic. But even that confession, made in a radio interview, was extracted with difficulty, and his agnosticism is plainly not limited to questions of divine providence. Whimsy is the tone of the times—a highly important tactic that often serves as a smokescreen behind which a strategic retreat is effected from adolescent conviction, and it involves no humility at all. One might invert the aphorism. The whimsical man, because he sees himself as everything, sees nothing for what it is.

Iris Murdoch stands far outside that mood. She has never been whimsical. She has always believed in something, has always believed that it mattered, and has always given an impression of wanting to believe more. For years she has fellow-travelled, so to speak, with faith. The communist metaphor is apt. Born in 1919 in Dublin of Irish Protestant stock and brought up in London, she became a freshman in Oxford in October 1938, in the month of

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the Munich Pact, and drifted out of communism after the war into ever more sceptical versions of democratic socialism, along with encounters with Existentialism and Buddhism; but before she was sixty she had entered into some highly personal version of conservatism, unattached to any party and increasingly drawn to religion, even at times to established religion. When her story is written, it will be the story of the intellectual life of her times. All her writings, however, are post-Marxian, and none is Christian—not even *The Bell* (1958), her fourth novel, which first signalled her profound fascination with faith.

But always, apparently, faith in the good rather than in God. If only one *could* believe. . . . Such has been her spiritual outlook for several decades. A few people may have turned Godward by reading her, but I doubt it. In fact it is precisely God the Father that she finds sadly incredible, and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* calls for a godless religion, "a theology which can continue without God." Why, after all, *should* religion monopolize the spiritual life? So the title of her big book is more detached than it sounds. No religion, and no known metaphysical system, as she believes, is reliably a guide to morals. Murdoch is a searcher rather than a finder, though she picks up certainties along the way. Did not Picasso once say that the artist first finds and then seeks? That sounds rather like her books. There are large intuitions behind what she writes, to be sure, grave certitudes and a disposition to faith. But she is still seeking, and though her mind has grown more religious with the years, it has still not moved to God.

That dilemma is the dilemma of the age. How much, if any, of the faith of our fathers can be salvaged for future use? The great question is there. But though the age puzzles about such things, it is unusual to find worries like these in fiction, and the enormous success of her novels suggests that the times may be less whimsical than one might otherwise have guessed. It is an achievement that makes you think. A secular civilization naturally enjoys mindless thrillers like Ian Fleming's James Bond series, and it may revel self-consciously in books like *Flaubert's Parrot*—books meant to make you feel clever, though not as clever as the author. But the Murdoch way, amazingly, has touched a deeper concern. Not a specifically British one, evidently, since she is

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much translated, and her fame is worldwide. So the chord she has touched is heard and heeded by a whole civilization, and the search for goodness may not be as killing a subject for fiction as it sounds. Meanwhile the churches, which are themselves deeply invaded by the secular spirit, offer no consistent solution, by now, to spiritual hunger, and the Soviet collapse helps to confirm that the politics of utopia was never more than a mirage. Perhaps philosophy, then, may cut a path through the jungle of moral bewilderment and doubt. It is an arresting hypothesis—the more so because it remains hypothetical.

The twin track of fiction and philosophy is hard to parallel, in English, in its time. It has a precursor, however, in Jean-Paul Sartre, the subject of Iris Murdoch's first book, whose literary career looks a little like hers pulled inside out. His first book, *La Nausée* (1938), it is rumored, was composed as a philosophical treatise; then a publisher suggested that if he invented some characters and gave them names it might easily be turned into a novel, and a novel (more or less) is what it is. There are moments in Iris Murdoch's writings when you see a similar interrelation at work. An essay can turn fictional, a fiction can turn philosophical, at the drop of a hat. There is a passage in *The Sovereignty of Good*, for example, where she imagines a mother called "M" who dislikes the girl her son has married. The daughter-in-law, who is called "D," lacks refinement, she feels; in fact M fears her son has married beneath him. "My poor son has married a silly vulgar girl," she thinks, reproaching herself for her own snobbery. Here, at the interface of fiction and moral philosophy, it is a case of philosophy turning into fiction, as with Sartre's first book. Philosophers, after all, have always used stories as examples, ever since Plato. What would it take to turn that extended illustration into a novel? It is, at any rate, the germ of one. Add names and dialogue, perhaps, and give it a conclusion; or leave it as it is—a brief snatch of philosophy heading indecisively into fiction, and left by a novelist for another time and another place.

This is where the paths divide. Sartre moved away from fiction, after his postwar plays; Iris Murdoch, at much the same time, moved irresistibly towards it. Most of her writings are novels, and I have heard her insist, in an interview, and with considerable emphasis, that philosophy has no part to play in fiction. It is "counter-natural." That, no doubt, is why she gave up teaching it.

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But all that needs to be carefully interpreted. She is hostile to seminar-style debates in fiction in the fashion of Mann's *Magic Mountain*, where story gets lost in analysis and where characters are strait-jacketed by the ideas they represent. Life is not like that, and a human being is always more than what he believes. But her hostility is paradoxical. She is against philosophical fiction, in that familiar sense, not because it is too philosophical but because it is not philosophical enough.

That is the nub of her critical case. Iris Murdoch was the first, I believe, to suggest that the tradition of realism that has dominated English fiction for nearly three centuries, since Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, might in the end be more philosophical than a good deal of what passes for philosophy; or that what we learn from conversation, heard or overheard, may teach us more about morality than what there is to be found in philosophical treatises. That is a bold claim, and she has been making it for a long time. There are grave difficulties in believing it, but they are not insuperable difficulties. One of them, to begin with the most familiar, concerns the charge of insularity. The British happen to live on an island, and they are used to being told by their neighbors that they overrate realism in fiction because their tradition of philosophy, at least since John Locke's *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* (1690), has for three centuries been dominated by empiricism. Iris Murdoch, oddly enough, was once victim to the same illusion herself, though she soon got over it. In an early essay, "A House of Theory," which appeared in 1958 in Norman Mackenzie's *Conviction*, she argued that "the British were never ones for theory" but have always been "empiricist, anti-metaphysical in philosophy, mistrustful of theoretical systems." It is no wonder if the English contribution to critical theory, vast as it is, is so widely undervalued on the continent of Europe and in the United States, as if Sir Philip Sidney, Coleridge and I.A. Richards had never existed. The British often undervalue it themselves; and as this passage illustrates, they undervalue it in a self-contradictory way. Empiricism, after all, was itself a theory, for better or worse, and the writings of John Locke and David Hume are plainly theoretical. But there seems to be a widespread assumption, for which the British themselves are partly to blame,

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that if a work is theoretical it cannot be British, and if it is British it cannot be theoretical.

All that is bad philosophy as well as bad history. Empiricism in Locke's style, as A.D. Nuttall showed in *A Common Sky* (1974), leaves even less certitude about the existence of a real world than Plato did; and it is doubtful, in any case, if any British philosopher of much eminence since the war can safely be called an empiricist. Locke's book, what is more, faced a barrage of criticism at home from the time it appeared. His views were never orthodox. They were hotly contested by English moralists throughout the eighteenth century; and with Coleridge, early in the nineteenth, English critical theory turned towards German Idealism. By the beginning of the twentieth century the dominant school of academic philosophy in Britain was Hegelian, much as in other European countries. For centuries it was easier to travel by sea than by land, after all, and the English Channel was never efficient at keeping ideas out. In fact British philosophers have commonly been under some massive foreign influence, like the Logical Positivism that came out of Vienna between the wars; and the enormous influence of Wittgenstein in England began long before his *Philosophical Investigations* appeared, posthumously, in 1953—the very year, as it happens, of Iris Murdoch's first book.

In any case there is a better answer than empiricism to explain the enormous and ever-recurring power of realism in England since Defoe, and it was Iris Murdoch who found it. It is the unique presence of Shakespeare. This is a highly original intuition about literary history, and from someone who has never been a literary historian, so I do not conceal my envy. It occurs, oddly enough, in an article that has only recently been reprinted, in her *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997),[1] and it deserves to be more widely celebrated. It is called, not very invitingly, "The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited"; it first appeared in the *Yale Review* in 1960, and it traverses at more deliberate pace some of the ground of another article, "Against Dryness," which she wrote in 1961 for *Encounter* and which now appears in the same collection.

Shakespeare, it will be remembered, was a dramatist scarcely

[1] EXISTENTIALISTS AND MYSTICS: Writings on Philosophy and Literature, by *Iris Murdoch*. Allen Lane/The Penguin Press. $37.95.

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read or performed anywhere outside Britain before the nineteenth century. Iris Murdoch has proposed him as the father of fictional realism—not for the commonplace reason that he drew from low life, as in the tavern scenes in the history plays, but because of the revolution he made in character. Shakespeare was the pioneer of what she called free character—of characters which, like Falstaff and Hamlet, grow into humanity beyond any pattern imposed by principle or plot. They are supple and undulating, as Montaigne put it, *souple et ondoyant*. "The pages of Shakespeare," she writes, "abound in free and eccentric personalities whose reality Shakespeare has apprehended and displayed as something quite separate from himself," and she praises him as "the most invisible of writers." A free character can live a life of contradictions, it should be remembered, since real beings are compounded, like Falstaff and Hamlet, of contradictory elements. We are none of us consistent, and all of us are more people than one. That is a property that neoclassical characters, as in Racine, wholly lack, and it is inconsistency of character that makes people, in the end, credible and interesting.

That, as she continues, was what was the matter with Modernism: T.S. Eliot and his school were quintessentially self-consistent and "dry." "I am unable to be confident from Mr Eliot's writings that he has ever enjoyed and admired any novel," she writes, and Jane Austen only failed to incur his censure because she places her characters "within an old conventional world." Eliot was always severely conservative, she implies; so was Jane Austen; and the tolerance that Iris Murdoch finds in Shakespeare and in Tolstoy is nowhere there. So Eliot was right, as she puts it, "to be afraid of Shakespeare, and to see in this loving toleration of, indeed delight in, manifold different modes of being, a beginning of the modern world."

That is an astounding passage, uncharacteristically defiant, and not only in its startling suggestion that T.S. Eliot may have been afraid of Shakespeare. It is astounding to read an intelligent attack on literary Modernism from a young radical mind as early as 1960. Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis, as Angry Young Men, were soon to make themselves famous for holding similar views, but they were later. All three emerged from the same time and place—Oxford in the 1940s—where they all studied, and that may or may not be coincidental. Such sudden identities of view are all

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the more striking, perhaps, when it is remembered that Iris Murdoch was never a member of any coterie, and nobody, I believe, ever called her an Angry Young Woman. A free character herself, she has always looked independent of mind and ready to veer, to reconsider and to change.

It is an astounding passage, too, in that it inverts what is commonly said about fiction in general and English fiction in particular. Novelists, we are often told, are not as interested in ideas as they should be. That was the message of Mary McCarthy's *Ideas and the Novel* (1980), where she complains indignantly of "an exclusion of ideas" imposed on recent fiction. Nowadays, she concludes, "ideas are held not to belong to the novel," the tradition of Aldous Huxley and D.H. Lawrence is sadly no more, and it is all the fault of those who teach literature and review it.

Mary McCarthy was the friend and disciple of Hannah Arendt, and that sounds more like Hannah Arendt than the author of novels like *The Groves of Academe*. It confuses ideas with thought, in any case, as intellectuals often do, and it forgets that modern man is all too easily enslaved by ideas and all too credulous of theory. Iris Murdoch's view of the moral world never forgets it. In love and friendship we can sometimes get it right, but we are not usually helped by ideas when we do. In "Against Dryness," in a memorable passage, she sees us as "benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy." That stops short of calling all ideas fallacious—but only just. But then she was a refugee from ideas, or at least from glib theorizing, ever since she abandoned her early Marxism. Theory is like a net. Grand theory, or ideology, is the enemy of thought, and she is profoundly suspicious of anything that offers itself as a total solution. "To generalize is to be an idiot," as William Blake once said. Reality is not a "given whole," she argues in the same article, which is why one is "forever at odds with Marxism." That was written rather early in her fictional career, in 1961. It is not just that the Marxian explanation of history is wrong. *Any* total explanation of mankind, unless it is merely truistic, is wrong. It is wrong because it claims to be total. To be under the net of ideas is the besetting sin of our age, as she believes, and it is time we got out from under it. "The human person is precious and unique," she ended her study of

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Sartre. But "we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction."

Realism in fiction can get us out from under theory. If a truth is complicated, as a character remarks in one of her novels, *An Accidental Man* (1971), "you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie." The realistic novelist, among others, is just such an artist. Stories, just because they are variously interpretable, can be true, and they offer truths people need to live by. Art, as she puts it in *The Sovereignty of Good*, is "not a diversion or a side-show." It is indispensable; it is "the most educational of all human activities," and we need it to live and to survive.

It will soon be half a century since her first novel, *Under the Net*, appeared, where her open hostility to totalizing accounts of the moral life began. The hero of that book became free when he realized that the world was simply too various to be explained by a single diagram and, what is more, that he was glad that it was so. A moral world governed by a single law or set of laws, after all, would be an enormously dull world; and if history were merely the history of class war, it would hardly be worth studying. So the message, over half a century, is bold and clear and, for all her ideological shifts, broadly harmonious. In fact in the chapter on Jacques Derrida in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she casually remarks, in a parenthesis, that she had discussed and dismissed Deconstruction in her first novel. That is a cheeky thing to say, since in 1954 Deconstruction was utterly unheard of, but it defines the direction of her mind. What she dismissed in her first novel was the anti-humanistic view that there can be no certain knowledge, only a network of meanings governed by "the infinitely great net of language itself." Her message is a new humanism. Certainties abound, as she believes, and we can have them.

The net of theory is to be escaped; and we can get out from under language, and its lust to conceptualize and theorize, if we try. We are only the slaves of theory if we choose to be so. After all, we learn other languages, so it cannot really be true to say that we are by necessity imprisoned by one. The world is known by looking as well as listening, in any case, and by a process in which language plays only one part among many; and Deconstruction and other post-structuralist notions were false dogma if only because they were hopelessly word-centered. They imagined that

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knowledge was governed by seminar-rules—that if you could not give an answer, you did not know. "The structuralist argument requires the assumption that, given that language is not anchored to the world by old, logocentric one-one correspondences, it cannot be anchored at all." Whereas it is anchored by a knowledge that may not need language. "I distrust the incommunicable," Sartre once said in *What Is Literature?* But to confuse knowledge with account-giving is one of the oldest of philosophical fallacies.

In other words, our critical avant-garde was philosophically Old Hat. Here Iris Murdoch speaks with an assurance one can only envy, as one eminent for decades in fiction and philosophy alike. The world, she insists, is not a single pattern of meaning. It is more like the mixed litter of kittens that baffles the hero at the end of *Under the Net.* Each of the kittens is individual in its coloring, as they lie newborn in a basket, but their individuality cannot be explained, and it is good news, what is more, that it cannot. The world would be a dull place if it could: it is "one of the wonders of the world." Knowing is not limited to explanations; it can mean seeing that it is so. It is in the liberating intuition that knowledge is more than language that fiction and the new philosophy meet.

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DAVID MASON

The Lotos-Eaters

> . . . but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotos,
> never cared to report, nor to return:
> they longed to stay forever, browsing on
> that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.
> —The *Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald

I know it was autumn when we met Wolfgang and Isabella, because we had been harvesting an Englishman's olives in a village far south of ours, and the rainy season had begun. We hitched a ride from his hilltop village to Stoupa on the Gulf of Messinias and were walking home to our village along the narrow coastal road when a car whooshed around the corner, nearly flattening us. At that speed, it was a miracle that we were recognized at all, let alone by Vassiliki, a woman we knew only slightly. Or maybe it was the mysterious Niki who recognized us—a beautiful woman with a brood of children by various fathers who was called a witch in our village and whose current lover was Stamatis, the village doctor. In any case, they backed up, rolled a window down and greeted us by name.

"Come with us," they said. "We're going to meet some friends." Out of the blue, we dropped our exhaustion and desire to go home for clean clothes and a hot shower. We quite uncharacteristically abandoned north, got into this panting little bug of a car and went south. And that was how the great friendship began—entirely by chance and luck.

It was 1980. Jonna and I were living in an American professor's house in the village in Mani. Our living there at all was accidental, and it has since occurred to me that accident and chance have shaped my life more than I care to admit. Our original plan had been to settle in Scotland. We lived in Upstate New York on my gardener's pay and saved my wife's hefty salesperson's salary and thought of a year of freedom in another country, some chilly croft where I would write and Jonna would—what? What would she do?

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That was the rub. She saw herself in this frozen croft where I would soak in Celtic atmosphere and she, perhaps, would knit.

You can see the dilemma. She was bright and did not want to spend a winter knitting in a croft while I withdrew in my customary way and wrote. So she said no, let's go someplace warm. And someone knew someone who had a house in Greece, a professor in Buffalo, so we called the professor and went to his house where he showed us photos of the village, and a week later we were in Greece, knowing not a word of the language or quite what we intended to do. I would write a novel, of course. The Scottish novel became the Greek novel. I changed the names. And I was young enough not to notice the riskiness of my ambitions, or that something about being a writer made being a husband doubly hard. A married couple are sometimes the last to know that they are headed for the rocks.

We got in the car and headed south. A storm dropped down out of the Taygetos Mountains, driving rain over the terraced olive groves, the whipped grass and gray stone walls. We huddled in the flimsy car, speaking in tatters of Greek and English. I was awkward at meeting people; my gift for solitude had been reinforced by two years as a gardener, and before that by time alone in Alaska and hitchhiking the perimeter of the British Isles.

Perhaps we all look back on early versions of ourselves and see the raw forms like unfinished compositions, full of misspellings and clumsy phrases. We were two rough sketches, hardly people it would seem, secret, hidden even to ourselves. I was twenty-four at the time, my wife a year younger, and villagers often mistook us for brother and sister, unable to believe that such young people could be married to each other. We were college-educated and, in practical terms, ignorant as babes. My wife was beautiful and I was hard-working; otherwise we were hopeless cases, adrift in a Greek village where we provided local amusement. The villagers called us *ta paidiá*, the children, excusing our almost daily *faux pas*.

This must have been one of the first hard rains of the season. The dry terraces were just turning green; at every level the olive trees were thrashed by the wind into a green-silver froth. They looked like furies tossing out their arms in an ecstatic dance, defying severe village custom. The afternoon darkened and the spare stone towers of the ancient villages paled in the rainlight.

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The Taygetos disappeared under smoky clouds, and it seemed the Mani had reverted to its past of wounded *filótimo* and violence.

We drove uphill to the village of Riglia and parked the car near the last house. From there we had to dash to the upper village, stone houses hunkering under their rough tile roofs on a hilltop with an apron of walled and terraced gardens spread out below. We passed through a gate between a stable and a tiny church (later I would see the smoky and pocked wall paintings inside it), and stepped up to the house of Wolfgang and Isabella.

How different we were from the Austrian couple who came down the steps in the rain. Isabella, with bare and blackened feet, was dressed in Hindu cotton and an old sweater. She walked with tiny, mock-pious steps, murmuring, hugging and kissing in a way I found startling. Wolfgang was a huge, sandy-haired mountain of a man with a flimsy mustache. He giggled when he greeted us. Niki, Stamatis and Vassiliki melted into these known embraces, while Jonna and I must have stood by like cigar-store Indians.

I remember the Spartan simplicity of their house, a table and a few chairs, straw mats on a stone floor, the open kitchen fire under a smoke hole in the roof, so much more primitive than the professor's house. I remember the rain-pelted front window with its view of the pale sea and faraway Koroni, the bells of a neighbor's goats as they were put away in the stable next door, then the utter silence of a village some distance from the main road. I remember tea and awkwardness. Jonna and I wore new nylon jackets chosen for efficient travel; Wolfgang and Isabella wore sweaters and rags. We were from altogether different worlds.

Somehow they found out I was a writer. Though I had published only a few poems, an agent in New York was trying to sell my novel about workers I had known in Alaska.

Wolfgang leaned toward me. "You have been to Alaska?"

"The Aleutians. I unloaded crab boats."

"What kind of crabs are these?"

"King crab. They're kept alive with seawater in the holds of the boats."

"Did you hear this?" Wolfgang made everyone stop talking and listen. "Crabs, they are kept alive in these boats. Amazing."

"Or else they'd become poisonous."

"This is amazing! So you are unloading these living crabs from the seawater?"

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"The water is pumped out. There are, say, ten thousand crab in a hold as big as this room, and you're standing on their backs. They move very slowly, so you can pick them up, two at a time, and throw them into these huge mesh bags."

"This I have never seen," Wolfgang said. "Isy, he has been to Alaska. This is incredible!"

It wasn't incredible to me. Growing up in the Northwestern United States, I knew many young men and women who fished or worked for the processors in Alaska. But it made Wolfgang take a sudden interest. That was how the accident of friendship began—in a room smelling of damp wool, wood smoke and thin oriental tea, in a patchwork language accompanied by silences. When we left Ano Riglia that evening, I doubted I would ever see the Austrians again. How little I knew about people, or about winter in Mani.

If you called Mani the Sicily of Greece, you would not be far wrong. After all, Maniots are said to have colonized Sicily in the old days. When we first flew into Athens, a girl on the plane warned us that Maniots were bad people, pirates and thieves and fascists. They were certainly a rugged lot, earthy and frequently dour, cut off from the rest of Greece by the high peaks of the Taygetos. They were never conquered by the Turks and were among the fiercest fighters in the War of Independence. Their land was covered with dry foliage: sage and scrub oak, asphodel and oleander, the occasional plane tree in the villages, cypresses like exclamation points in the stunning hills. It was a steep land cut into terraces for the olives.

The house we used for the first eight of our thirteen months in Greece was one of the modern concrete and stone houses with a walled garden and several astonishing modern conveniences like a refrigerator and a washing machine. Two walls of the house contained tall windows (screens in summer) with varnished jalousies to keep out intense sunlight or sudden storms.

We had arrived in late summer and had grown used to the easy weather, days spent swimming and learning Greek and walking in the fragrant hills. But as winter approached we discovered how cold a stone house could be. Many days we huddled close to the *mangáli*, a small Turkish brazier in which we burned crushed olive pits, or we squandered a few drachmas on propane for the gas

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heater, turning ourselves in front of it like slow-cooking meat. Frequently in the evenings we went to the home of our dear friend, Anna. Because she was in mourning for her husband, Christos, who had died the year before, she refused to leave her house. Anna had a fireplace and a television. We learned a fair amount of Greek in conversation with Anna, whose dramatic gestures clarified, or oversimplified, all ambiguities. We also learned from the television, watching Greek soap operas. When we were sick, Anna made us tea with brandy, into which we dipped *paximáthia*, or rusks. She mothered us, coached us in matters of local behavior. Other women from the village stopped in to gossip beside Anna's fire and to cajole her into leaving her widow's weeds, and Anna would sprout tears and relive the drama of countless losses while her hands fretted at her knitting. There were stories of extreme poverty, of murder and revenge, courtship and the dowry system in which land was the supreme measure of wealth; of the Italian Occupation, and the Germans, resistance and reprisals, the Civil War, massacres, hangings; of the saintliness of Christos and the endlessness of work for a woman in Greece, and how the dead became vampires if improperly mourned. And there were the constant permutations of politics.

"David?"

"Yes, Anna."

"Why does America not love Greece?"

"But Anna, we love Greece very much."

"Then why let Turkey take Cyprus away from us? Why does America love our enemies more? We Greeks have given you so much. Democracy and science and poetry. Aristotle and Plato, Homer, Sophocles. . . . "

"And Seferis?"

"Yes, and Seferis. Do you know when Seferis was here in the village he heard my sister sing?"

"Seferis was here?"

"Yes, he came to visit Fermor, and one day in the olives he heard Voula singing. She has a beautiful voice, like an angel. And he called her a little songbird and wanted to hear her again. But the Turks—" in a flash she returned to her former topic—"they are barbarians and murderers. Why does America love them more?"

I learned to steer clear of controversy in these conversations. I

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would listen politely even when I disagreed, and Anna played the elder sister to us. She was a natural actress in the melodramatic style. As long as we kept to the confines of our roles as *ta paidiá*, ignorance was bliss. She taught Jonna to knit, so our avoidance of that Scottish croft had in one sense changed nothing at all.

At the end of the evening, Anna would jokingly tell me to fetch my *tsánta*, or bag. This was an old olive oil tin with its lid cut off and a wire handle—a homemade bucket. I slung the bucket on a knobbed stick she had given me, and brought it to the fire. Setting her knitting aside, Anna filled our bucket with several shovelfuls of hot coals from the fireplace and bid us good night. Jonna and I walked home through the darkened village with a bucket of red-hot coals swinging on the stick between us. We walked quickly because of the cold, and I remember the wind swirling sparks from our portable fire and trailing them out behind us in the night. We carried that bit of warmth from Anna's house to ours, so that the cold stone house would not be quite so cold when we were ready for bed.

One afternoon, Wolfgang and Isabella paid a surprise visit to our house. We talked, and perhaps we had a meal and agreed to visit them in Ano Riglia. By November there were very few foreigners in Mani; we quickly grew to rely on each other for relief from our village roles. Anna would not have approved of their gypsy dress, so we could not share them with her. One had to keep acquaintances distinct. With Anna we were friendly innocents, with other foreigners we were formal acquaintances and fellow readers. But with Wolfie and Isy a rarer plant began to grow through the winter: friendship based on mutual discovery rather than role-playing. Wolfie and I had both been gardeners—I for a wealthy Upstate couple, he for an Austrian aristocrat—so we had both known the meditative work of pruning and planting. For Jonna and Isy there was the rich terrain of young womanhood to explore.

The weather warmed for one of their early visits to our house. We hiked up a limestone footpath to a village higher on the mountainside, and I remember how slowly Wolfie and Isy moved because Isy wanted to notice every plant poking from the rocks; she knotted late blossoms into the dark curls of her hair. Wolfie walked with his long arms hanging loosely, smiling at the woman

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beside him whose shawls were constantly loosening so that, by the time we were halfway up the path, Isy was half-naked. She seemed unconscious of these unravelings, amused by our mild shock at the bronzed exposure of her breasts. In those days I was more tightly-wound than I am now; I came from a rather chaotic family, and perhaps that doomed me to seek tradition and stability in the world. My chief concern about Isy's nudity was not, alas, its loveliness, but what the villagers would think. I didn't want it known that *ta paidiá* were seen frolicking in the hills with wicked foreigners.

Isy was Viennese, the daughter of a businessman. She had met Wolfie at a commune among the organic vegetables—or "wegetables," as Wolfie would have called them. He was recovering from a catastrophic marriage and a sequence of spiritual quests, and Isy must have seen in him her way out of a life in which even the communards were conventional. They were journeying east when we met them; this was only a way station in their path. Then they went east and we went west, and that is what this story is finally about.

Our winter with Wolfie and Isy was spent telling stories. I told stories of Alaska, or of growing up in the American West, meeting Jonna in Colorado, moving back to be near her family in Rochester, making money to get away from making money. Wolfgang found my tales of American expansiveness fascinating, which must have flattered me. His was a Lawrentian spirit, sloppy and mildly crazed, but hot on the trail, we thought, of substantial truths. Where Isy had grown up among the baroque perfections of Vienna, Wolfie was from a village near Salzburg, a mountain boy who had learned about mendacity when, at sixteen, he found that his mother had concealed her Jewishness from him, from the whole community. She had survived the war by hiding out somewhere in Poland, but she was not fooled by the Allied victory into thinking anti-Semitism had been defeated. So she had kept her secret, and somehow Wolfie had discovered it and learned what for him was an important lesson, that people are living lies. He spoke of it in amateur anthropological terms: societies as tissues of lies, arbitrary signifiers detached from the private unhappiness of citizens. No one was living the life he or she wanted to lead; everyone was bound by the insane expectations of his or her own culture. The result was a planet of sick people,

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taking out their unhappiness on each other. Wolfie wanted to escape the vicious trap of self-abuse into which the world had fallen.

Perhaps we were sitting on mats by their kitchen fire when he discoursed in this way. We ate the charred flatbread Isy warmed on the coals, olives and cheese, and various greens plucked from the footpaths or from their walled garden plot, while Wolfie told us the story of his life. A professional chemist, white coat, office keys, name on the door, he had sickened of ambition at a time when it was common to do so, and he left it all behind to make his spiritual pilgrimage. He had read Hesse, so of course he went to India, accompanied by a woman with Saxon-red hair. They got married. Now Wolfie referred to her as "the bitch, this fucking bitch that I was married to."

"You must meet this woman to believe her," Isy added. "She is always controlling everything. She has this craziness of control."

"I was crazy in those days," Wolfie said, "otherwise how can I marry such a fucking, fucking bitch as this?"

On their way to India in the 1970s, Wolfie and his wife lived briefly in Greece. Land in Mani was very cheap, so they bought a ruined house in Ano Riglia. The ex-wife still owned half the house, in fact, and at one point in the winter Wolfie and Isy stayed with us because "the bitch" had come to visit and had driven them out with her passion for cleanliness.

India was the quest for *dharma* in a world of *maya.* I had an older brother who made similar travels, but his quest was more political than spiritual. After living in Africa, he travelled east to make his own investigation of American involvement in Southeast Asia at the end of the Viet Nam War. I worshipped my brother's courage. When I was in high school I got letters from him in Cambodia at about the time Wolfie would have been in India. Wolfie had also been a mountain climber when he was younger. I had climbed with my brother in Colorado. He had climbed in several countries, but it was on a mountain near our hometown in Washington State that he fell to his death in 1979. Only a year later I was in Greece, listening to Wolfie's adventures.

Wolfie and the bitch ended up studying with a guru in Indonesia. Rather, the bitch studied, but Wolfie was transformed. I don't know what happened to him there, though I heard stories from others about frightening moments, such as a time when they

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still lived in Greece and he had tried to fly, breaking his leg in a fall off the balcony.

For Wolfie it wasn't madness, of course. It was connection. It was intimacy. It was life. It was truth. The bitch did not agree. She tricked him into going to Singapore, where she had him committed. The doctors in Singapore gave him electroshock treatments. Wolfie's spiritual quest ended with a series of artificially-induced seizures that produced a temporary state of normality.

There followed a few ghost years, gardening back in Austria for an aristocratic family, pacific years in which he broke with the bitch and found solace in communal living. Then he met Isy and moved back to Greece. When the summer came, Wolfie would return to his teacher in Indonesia and try to learn what he had lost to electroshock.

He was a wounded man, but he never lost the romantic conviction that civilization was at fault. "Look at all these people," he would say, waving his huge hands as he spoke. "The young people in these willages, they cannot mate with each other because of tradition, they must have all this dowry shit. Their mothers wear black all of their lives because of tradition, or if the fathers are alive they beat the mothers because of tradition. And look at this American house where you live. What is this for, this clothes washer and this modern stove? What good is such a house where you don't touch the things that are feeding you? All of this is crazy. The old way and the new way are both crazy. In every country people are all the time working for money so they can have the key to the office and the name on the door and the little white coat, and in their hearts they are crying because they know this is all bullshit.

"I mean," he would say, "I can look out from my window here and see Kostas taking his goats up on the mountain like he is doing for fifty years, and his father and grandfather and great-grandfather, and it looks like paradise. I think of myself, God damn, where I am! Where I am! Did I ever think I would be in such a place? In this fucking beautiful place where people are all the time making their own little hell out of nothing. I think of this place that is so beautiful, and everyone hates his life here and follows fucking tradition. It's crazy!"

He had grown a wispy beard for winter, his unwashed hair hung

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to his shoulders, and his great bear's frame rocked to and fro when he spoke. "Where I am," he would say. "Where I am!" He improvised an English learned from rock and countercultural books, a jerryrigged philosophy of mysticism, loose historical data and ecology. From the lab in Austria he had moved to a kind of missionary life; he taught me how to build a compost pile and how to recognize edible plants around the house or in the fields. Sometimes we argued. When we argued politics he took the side of the terrorists, I the cause of the ordinary people who were their usual victims. When I showed him my Greek novel he was outraged by its fraudulence and he told me so to my face. When I showed him my Alaskan novel he told me it was a real story, he was impressed. He taught me something about genuineness, I suppose. He giggled like a little boy when we visited, and his embrace was like that of a mountain, swallowing me up.

Isy made culinary masterpieces out of nothing. Her salads were glazed with sugar and decorated with tiny edible flowers from the hills. She made *spanakópitta* with nettles instead of spinach, and when she discovered apricots in our yard, treated us to apricot dumplings coated with sugar. Wolfie brought out his guitar and his two songbooks: Leonard Cohen and Judy Collins. Of the four of us, Jonna sang best, but she was shy about singing in front of others. She had little confidence in the validity of her emotions. Maybe that was one of the problems silently dooming our marriage. We croaked Leonard Cohen by the fire and slept on mats in their smoky little house.

I remember one lingering evening in spring when Isy had moved her cooking fire to the terrace in front of the house with its view of the village rooftops and the sea below—*san ládi*, the Greeks would say, "like oil." We were eating Isy's flatbread and looking out on the sea when two owls suddenly perched on the crooked roof of the old church below. As we watched, the owls mated furiously, emitting sharp little cries. Just as suddenly they flew away, and all was silent again.

We looked at each other with a wild surmise. The quiet had descended upon us and allowed us to witness this astounding event. There was nothing else we could do but laugh.

The red sun hovered over the oily sea. Kostas called his goats, and the village settled down to its uneasy truce, a whole history of feuds and alliances hidden behind its gray stone walls.

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There has never been another year like that year. We did not worry about money, we worked only when we wanted to and slept the deep sleep of people recovering from some mysterious illness. Greece itself was not the cure. No country is a cure. As Wolfie would say, all countries are crazy. No, this was merely an opportunity to get away from our families, to see our homeland from a distance, to slough off accumulated anxieties and inhabit dreams remembered from the long, long nights.

In the spring we had to leave the modern house to its owners, and the result was something far more beautiful than we had anticipated. Anna had an uncle by marriage, Barba Yiorgi, who owned land south of the village in a little bay called Kalamitsi. There were olive groves and polled mulberry trees, and there was a one-room stone house that had stood empty for years. In exchange for some work on the land, Barba Yiorgi let us live there through the warm months.

Kalamitsi was a miraculous place, primitive enough to please Wolfie and Isy, but blessed with every natural convenience that a *nouveau sauvage* could desire. In ancient times, one story went, a shrine to the Nereids had stood on the headland near the bay. Some previous resident had discovered a freshwater spring on the land, and had chiseled a bowl in the rock where the water collected before draining into a slime-covered cistern. Whenever I wanted fresh water, I had merely to scrape the dead bugs off the surface of the spring and dip my pan for clear liquid that seemed blessed by the gods. From the cistern I fed my large vegetable garden, where I had used a rough mattock to hack plots for tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini, onions, garlic, okra and potatoes. I fertilized the soil with dried pig manure scraped from a nearby shed. We grew herbs as well, and kept pots of basil about to ward off bugs.

The little stone house had a roof made of kalamus reeds, a sort of bamboo, and the tiles common to that part of the world. Mice scurried at all hours between the reeds and tiles. I screened the two windows and painted their frames and limed the walls so they looked like melted white icing. We swept the house clean, stuffed the mouse-torn mattress with grass and herbs, hung our provisions in a cage from the rafters, used an old blanket for a front door. We read by candlelight (which gave me a profound

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appreciation for electricity) and cooked on a one-burner gas stove Anna had loaned us. We used soap made from olive oil when we needed to wash clothes or dishes, heating water in the sun, and when we wanted to bathe we dove into the sea.

Below our little house there was a cluster of dark boulders from which we could swim. A trickle of fresh water, perhaps from the same marvelous spring that fed our garden, filled a bucket under one of the rocks. We used this gallon of fresh water to wash the salt off our skin and out of our hair when we had finished bathing in the sea.

It was a slow life. We wore few clothes and regressed to a simpler state, which was easy to do in the warm weather. Even as close as we were to the main road, we felt cut off from the tourist traffic. There was a small stand of bananas (someone's agricultural experiment) near which we had hung a hammock, and I remember lying in the hammock, reading and watching huge rats on the swaying banana leaves. They never bothered us and we never bothered them. Our only neighbors in the bay were the great writer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, and his wife Joan, and one night I heard their opera recordings drifting from their villa, over the olives and cypresses to where I lay, imagining the rats enraptured by an aria. It was a gentle life, our five months in Kalamitsi. Even our toilet, a pit with a stone seat, had a glorious view of the sea. I began to feel like Wolfie, shouting, "Where I am! Where I am!"

Wolfie and Isy sat with us at siesta in the shade of a cypress tree, where we hoped to catch a few rags of midsummer breeze. We ate our main meal out there above the bay, falling asleep or stepping down the hot stones for a dip in the sea. The hot, motionless air rang with cicadas, and sometimes the only escape was to submerge ourselves in the bluegreen water. This was a lazy life of eating, talking, swimming, sleeping some nights under the stars, the cicadas having finally silenced when the breeze soughed down from the mountains. Days so hot and slow we were like dogs panting on a porch. Make no movement that is not absolutely necessary. Watch the ants crawl through the dry grass on their busy little workroads. Peel open a fig and spread it on your fingertips, sucking the red flesh inside. Then sleep and wait for the night to come, when the olive trees looked like Nereids.

Of course we were intoxicated. Greece became our dream of freedom and ease. We wrote to friends in America, telling them—just as Henry Miller had once told his friends in New

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York—to drop everything and come to the land of truth and beauty. It was a lotos-eating life in which we were stoned on sea and sunlight. We were *ta paidiá* in more ways than we knew, ignorant of responsibility, forgetful of the deeper rewards of work. For Jonna and me, it would take great suffering, divorce and marriage to others to begin to place ourselves in the real world, and when I returned to Greece sixteen years later it would be almost as another man, hopefully better equipped to love the place for what it is, to accept its many changes, and not to desire it only for my own gratification.

When the time came for Wolfie to leave, he and Isy stopped at Kalamitsi to visit us, and to say farewell. It had all been planned; Wolfie would go off alone and make his way to Indonesia. Money had come from Austria, perhaps from the book he intended to publish. Isy would stay a few more weeks in Greece, then return to her mother's house in Vienna.

We sat up late by lamplight, talking and telling stories. We had been through the winter together, had larked in meadows when the spring came and lazed through summer. We had become friends. That huge gulf I felt between us when we first met had disappeared, and I felt a brotherly bond with Wolfie that I missed with my own dead brother. The year had changed all of us, as if the scattered notes of our characters were finding the thread of a story, and in the story a new sort of homeland.

In the morning Wolfie said he wanted no good-byes. We were to stay put by the house where we could see him walking away. Isy could start on the path with him, but then she was to turn around and come back. He seemed eager to be on the road again, and his step was light as he carried his rucksack into the olive groves, an unkempt bear of a man who waved a huge hand and disappeared into the trees.

We saw him a last time when he stepped onto the road that curved away into the village, where he would catch the Athens bus. We were calling his name and blowing kisses. Then he was gone. Isy came back to us, sobbing, and stood a long time in Jonna's embrace.

Who knows how long we might have stayed in such a position, waving as Wolfie disappeared or embracing Isy or sitting without talking in our little house? I can imagine us frozen there in the dream of expatriate freedom, the almost insane belief that we could be other than ourselves. As it happened, we did not stay. I was offered

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a screenwriting job in the U.S., adapting my unpublished novel about Alaska, and suddenly became quite drunk on the idea of writerly success. I would go back to America, I thought, and live a life of unfettered bliss, writing and being paid pots of money for it.

So we went back in the fall of 1981, and I worked at the writer's trade and for a time I did make money. Then the company that hired me folded like a house of cards in a hurricane. I was still the same troubled pile of unfinished notes, only now I was older, and Jonna was moving slowly but inexorably away on a path of her own. Everything we thought we had escaped by living in the village had only been put on hold. Within four years our marriage had failed, and I had failed to make a living as a writer.

Every now and then, word came from Wolfie and Isy. She had left Austria to join him in Indonesia, where he completed his course with the guru. Then he took an interest in the chemistry of rice cultivation, and went to work for the Indonesian agricultural ministry. I read these brief reports as I labored in graduate school, having decided in my thirties to teach. Finally, there was a card saying that they would come to America—Canada, actually—and they hoped to see us, not knowing we were divorced.

I have not heard from them since.

I remember Wolfie's big, flat-toothed smile when he listened to stories around the fire, his long-fingered hands dancing in air when he talked. He spoke of human behavior with the freewheeling curiosity of a self-made anthropologist. He once told me that he was able to walk among shy Indonesian crabs without frightening them by moving in steps of tai chi slowness, as if he weren't moving at all. I wonder who he has moved among now, and whether anyone can see him watching.

Did they ever come to the New World? I almost dreaded their seeing the conventional creature I had become. What a gulf there might be between us. A broken marriage and a new life later, would I be able to let down my guard and meet them again? Our first meeting was by accident, or fate if you believe in such things, and now I do not know how to reach them anymore, or even whether they are alive. Many days go by when I do not think of Wolfie and Isy. Perhaps they have become conventional, like me—house, car, job, name on the door, the whole show. Perhaps they too have discovered a kind of ordinary happiness.

What would Wolfie say if he knew I was thinking such things?

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JOHN McCORMICK

In the Mean Time

> I believe that history, properly undertaken, is the record not of what happened but of what mattered.
> —Douglas Jerrold, *An Introduction to the History of England from Earliest Times to 1204*

Late August 1932. My father and I stood facing each other on a street corner in St. Paul, Minnesota. I would turn fifteen in three weeks; although he was no more than fifty-two, he looked much older, frowning and troubled. "I've got ten dollars," he said, "and that's all I've got." He rummaged in his wallet. "Here's five. I'm sorry it isn't more."

"That's all right. It's plenty. I won't need much."

We shook hands and he wished me luck. "Don't forget to write," he called after me as I walked away, lugging my things in an old suitcase of his. I pretended not to hear; I wanted to get out of sight of his old once-fine suit and eternal brown hat to cover his baldness. I felt simply glad to be on my way, on my own, away from his gloom and silences and away from his attempt to "make a home" for me. I was on my way to the State Fair grounds and a job that would pay me eight dollars a week and get me out of the Depression-ridden, hateful State of Minnesota. I was free. But then I remembered that I had no address to which to write, for the good reason that my father had no address, as of that morning. We had read the *Odyssey* in school, and I thought of Telemachus trying to find his father, while I was trying to get away from mine.

In his efforts to eke out a living by selling houses, my father had met a German-born widow with a house to sell. No buyers appeared, but one day my father announced to me after school that he was going to be married to the German woman and move into her house. It was time I had a real home in place of the series of hotels and rooming houses we had lived in. I didn't like the woman from day one; she smelled of nervous sweat and cologne water. It was obvious to me that she didn't care for me, either. In

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the new household, I was required to run the vacuum cleaner, wash dishes, and go to the shops for food. In the center of her dining room table a hideous cut-glass bowl was mounted on a cut-glass pediment. While vacuuming one day, I tilted the table, unintentionally, causing the cut-glass bowl to totter and fall, shattering like a dropped light bulb. The German, as I thought of her, didn't just weep, she bawled, accusing me of maliciously breaking her bowl, a wedding present from her previous marriage.

A month or so later on my way to the grocery store, I fell on the ice, and when I looked for the five-dollar bill the German had given me to pay, it was gone. I went back to where I had fallen, but found only snowbanks, the clanking snow chains of an occasional passing car, and a sharp wind. This time the German wept tears of rage as she accused me of stealing her money. Believing that he had resolved the dilemma my existence was to him, my father refused to see that a civil war was taking place under his nose. Occasionally there would be a truce. In one such period, I asked the German to teach me to speak her language. She was uneducated, speaking English with an accent. She was embarrassed by my request; a typical immigrant, she wanted to forget her birthplace and her mother tongue and be a good citizen among the other German immigrants of St. Paul, Minnesota. "You should not sit reading books," she would say. "You should go out and see the city." A nervous woman, she would sit in her black or gray dress, wringing her hands and frequently adjusting her eyeglasses.

If this is having a mother, leave me out, I thought. Before the first year of their marriage was up, separation and divorce were in the wind. I cannot be certain, but I think that without actually lying, my father had conveyed to the German by talk of big deals in the offing, by his daily cigars and by his Californian tailored suits that he was a man of means. He in turn seemed to think that the German had been left a tidy sum by the deceased, which sum no longer existed, if it ever did have any reality. Nor can I be certain that the German actually turned my father and me out of the house, but I think she did. Toward the end, she wept continually and refused to speak to either of us. To me leaving that house was salvation from suffocation.

From my limited and selfish point of view, my father's marital disaster had one positive result. The German had a married

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daughter, Laura, who let rooms in her house near the fairgrounds to fair people who turned up in early September, just before the annual State Fair. Laura was kind to me; she had tried to teach me to waltz, and provided occasional respite from the German's household. Laura treated me like an equal, an adult, and introduced me to one of her annual tenants, a Texan who travelled the country with all the apparatus of a bingo game on a ton-and-a-half truck. I begged him for a job, and he took me on, mainly, I think, to oblige Laura, who probably was more to him than landlady. Whatever his motive, I was and remain grateful to him for opening layers of the world the existence of which I had had no clue.

I had sat as a spectator in the theater of adult life from early childhood, and had read about it from the time I was old enough to have a library card, but now I was immersed in that longed-for state from the first hour of my new job. Hank Myers, who turned out to be the foreman of the gang of four, had arrived at the fairgrounds the night before with the truck. The great tent had to be unloaded and set up, the benches and plank counters put in place, and the prizes placed temptingly on a kind of dais, above which Mr. Gray, our boss, would sit before a microphone, calling numbers drawn from a box when the whole affair was up and running. At first I called him Mr. Gray, but later he said I was to call him Gray, like the others. Jim, Stan, and I would sell cards to the gamblers for five cents and distribute small piles of corn grains to be placed on the numbers Gray called. The really high rollers would play two or even three cards at a time. When someone finally had five numbers in a row, he would shout "Bingo," and Hank would then verify the card by calling the numbers back to Gray, and the lucky winner would select a blanket, a kewpie doll, or a plaster bulldog for his prize. It was all simple-minded, straightforward, and as I was soon to learn, unlike many games at the fairs and carnivals we worked, it was honest.

The day ran from seven in the morning to midnight or 1:00 A.M. We slept under the tent on pallets made of packaged prize blankets, covering ourselves with ones already opened. Those sleazy blankets could not keep out the cold as the fall nights chilled away the summer heat. I would wash in the fairground toilets, eat some bread and go to work dusting the benches and

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folding the blankets, which would go as prizes during the day. By nine o'clock the mechanical organs on the rides would begin blaring, the ferris wheel would turn, and the farm hands would be feeding and currying the prize animals on display. At first it seemed like real, glamorous life to me, but in a few days the endless, repetitious noise became annoying and the early September heat made the day long. Often a farm family, man, wife, and half-grown children, would stop at our tent, debating whether to invest their nickels in the chance of winning a needed blanket. More often than not the man or his wife would nod no, and they would pass on to the next stall with its clicking wheel and prize ham hanging before them to be won.

"Don't let those people get away," Gray would tell us. "Call 'em in, sell 'em."

Hank was good at barking, the carnival term for calling 'em in. He had been working the fairs for five or six years and knew carny lingo. "Take the load off your feet," he would bawl. "Only a nickel for one of these gorgeous prizes," and he would gesture like a Renaissance courtier at the gilded dolls. Sometimes I would try to imitate him, but I was uneasy and self-conscious.

The Minnesota Fair was easier to work than briefer fairs. It went on for two weeks, so that there were slack times when we could sit down and talk. I mostly listened to the others, who did not talk down to me, but nonetheless helped me learn how to cope with life on the road. I had only one pair of pants. Jim, a thin, tanned man of forty or so, told me to get another pair. "Why?" I asked.

"You'll get lousy, that's why. Tell Gray you have to go into town and get another pair in the Salvation Army."

Jim had been in the war and on the road ever since. He was not a professional bum, but he was a professional drunk and would work for a few weeks or months then go on a binge, riding the empty boxcars between jobs. Jim, Stan and I were paid the same wage, eight dollars a week; Hank got ten. I resolved to live on half my pay, and asked Gray to hold back the other half until I asked him for it. It was Jim who convinced me that I could live on four a week: "You buy crackers and sardines when you get the chance. Don't eat fairground food; it costs too much and it'll give you a bellyache." Sardines were ten cents a can and would make two meals on crackers. Often we had to eat fairground hot dogs or hamburgers, and Jim was right about bellyaches. I smoked a pipe

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and spent fifteen cents a week on a tin of Sir Walter Raleigh tobacco. The others smoked cigarettes.

The final night of a fair would always be crowded. People would put off their visits, or plan to attend them only for the fireworks which signalled the end of the fair and also the beginning of fall. We three underlings would work the tables until midnight and after. Hank would spell Gray as caller when Gray began to get hoarse. Finally we'd drop the canvas curtains while we packed the prizes and dismantled the interior equipment. Then came the exacting job of dropping the tent, whacking loose the three-foot iron stakes with a twelve-pound maul, and loading tent, prizes and all on the truck and securing the load with sisal lines. That work would often take until daybreak, when Gray would set off in his small car and the rest of us would board the truck for the drive to the next fairgrounds. With luck we might have a day to set up in; but often we would have to set up and begin selling cards without a break.

My apprenticeship in observation as a detached child in other people's lives proved valuable now that I had become an actor. I had grown tall fast and was badly coordinated, but watching how the others, Hank in particular, used their bodies, how they stood when driving a stake and how they went about heavy lifting, helped me get by, until my own coordination improved.

One evening Jim came upon me in a field near the tent, where I was driving a stake, knocking it loose, then driving it again. "What in the hell are you doing that for?" He stamped his cigarette in the dust.

"I'm practicing. Trying to keep my eye on the stake when I swing."

"Well, you're as green as they come, but you sure ain't yellow." From Jim that was praise, and I felt happy about it.

I liked heavy work, it made the day pass, but I was bad at it. Hank was a forbearing foreman. When I drove a tent-stake too close to the tent or broke a plate on its way to the prize rack, he would only sigh, then show me how I had gone wrong. We smoked too much as we worked and broke off only to relieve thirst and other parts of the anatomy. Nobody swore, or not much, and then for considerable provocation at what Santayana calls "the authority of things." You could not force things against their implacable, unchanging nature. Hank and Jim and Stan were

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unskilled, but they had common sense; I learned before I was much older that the sense called common is anything but. Gray had common sense and dignity to go with it. A neatly put-together, small man; with his moustache and soft Texas drawl, I realized years later that he was the very image of William Faulkner.

At the Iowa State Fair I became aware of two women, or girls, hanging around our tent. Both were tall and stringy, with dirty-looking, long hair. They chewed gum and smoked cigarettes at the same time, flaunting their bottoms by their way of walking. I was vaguely bothered that Hank and Jim kidded around with these girls in slack times, passing them cigarettes and carrying on in what seemed to me an unmanly way. At age fifteen and two weeks I had some notion, deriving from schoolyard smut and dictionary-hunts, of what went on in private between married people—an idea made all too vivid by what I would later recognize as a combination of hormones, libido, and plain lust—but my puritanical Catholic education had scarcely prepared me for the raw sexual play taking place before my eyes in the dust, heat and racket from the "great midway" at that fair.

"Them's nice knees you got," Jim said to Lucille, the dark-haired, rough-skinned one. "I wonder what's up there between them?" And he laughed.

"You jest keep right on wondering, Jimmy-boy." She pouted and smiled her come-on.

Like the Minnesota Fair, the Iowa Fair ran for two weeks, and the girls would show up during the empty times in the morning, and sometimes in the evening as well. Occasionally in their aimlessness they would even talk to me. They taught me carny-talk, a variation of pig Latin that carnival people used around laymen when they were setting up a con-trick of one kind or another. Lucille's standard greeting was, "Heeazow's your leeaziver?" (How's your liver?) I hated it, but I was fascinated by this simple-minded and scurrilous secret language. The girls were not yet whores, but well on their way to the next station down that line.

When we finally packed up and set out in the truck for Kansas, I chided Hank, my favorite: "I can't understand what you see in those women. Chewing gum with their mouths open and smelling

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like dime store perfume." Hank, a natural gentleman if a rough one, merely smiled at Jim, sitting next to me, who smiled back. Neither actually answered, and I knew I was rebuked for pushing priggishly in where I had no business to be.

As we moved south the summer seemed to move with us, a good thing too, because I had no cold weather clothing beyond a sweater, and it had turned cool and rainy toward the end of the Iowa Fair. Oklahoma was the next big one, but we played a county fair in Missouri and a carnival somewhere in Kansas. Instead of my riding in the truck, on a long jump Gray would take me in his car to help with the driving. Eventually we would stop at a hotel, where he would stake me to a dollar room, pure luxury, for there would be a big old bathtub on lion claws down the hall, possibly hot water and a wonderful soak, after which I would sleep for twelve hours. I had never been South before. I had read history and fiction about the Civil War and thought of the South as an admirable land of happy, liberated slaves and white warriors, noble in defeat. The reality soon displaced my ideal images. I didn't believe that any place could be poorer than the North, but Southern poverty in the Depression, rooted in post-Civil War ruin, was bitter beyond any sweetening. A minor disaster provided my first taste of that bitterness.

We had played a carnival in Missouri that the natives seemed to go out of their way to avoid. Gray said we would have to pull up and get out. He wasn't even "making the nut," fair-jargon for meeting expenses. We had driven the truck a mile or two when it stuttered, lost power, and exuded a black cloud from its tailpipe. Hank, driving, said "Holy smoke," and I laughed. "Shut up. Dammit, John, this is trouble."

"Pistons?" Jim asked.

"You said it."

Hank walked back to town and was gone for half a day. He had finally got through to Gray at his house in East Texas, where he had gone to tend to business there before meeting us in Oklahoma City. The truck would have to be repaired in the town, and Hank was to wait for it and drive it to the Oklahoma fairgrounds. Jim, Stan and I would have to make our own way there; Gray couldn't come up with bus money.

"I guess we could hop a freight," Jim said. "But they mostly go west out of here."

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"Not for me," Stan said. "These Southern railroad cops are bastards. They'd as soon blackjack you dead as look at you. They near killed an old buddy of mine."

"Here?" Jim asked.

"North Carolina."

"It might not be so bad here. John, you never rode the rails, did you?"

"No."

"Well, maybe this ain't the place for your first lesson. We better hitchhike."

"We better get ourself cleaned up. Nobody gonna pick up a bum," Stan said.

Jim was seething, I could tell, because Gray hadn't so much as bought us bus fare, or promised to. He said he was going to take a little rest, and he might or might not go down to Oklahoma. Stan told me to set out on the road first; one had a better chance for a ride than two, and a kid had the best chance of all. He'd follow maybe by bus if he had enough change in his pocket.

In a way I was glad to set out on my own, and I was tempted to try the boxcars that rumbled through the little town from time to time, sometimes stopping to take on water or for some other mysterious reason. Plenty of people my age rode them, whole families rode them. You would see gaunt women with little barefoot kids, standing in the open doors of the empties as the freights rolled through crossings and towns. I wondered why so many had become so desperate, mainly farm people they appeared, but I had to put such thoughts out of mind to consider my own next move. Hitchhiking was probably a better idea.

Not much traffic moved on the roads in that mean time, especially not in the South. I was five days covering some 400 miles, plenty of idle time between rides to see beaten-down people in wrecks of houses, dressed in near-rags and thin with the scrawniness of hunger. A few farm trucks went from farms to towns, and sometimes travelling salesmen in passenger cars would zoom by my begging thumb. A Negro (a polite term then) in an old Model A Ford stopped to ask where I was going. After a few miles he asked, "You got money wif you?" "I've got a dollar," I lied. I had almost three dollars. "We going to stop at this here gas station. You put a dollar of gas in the tank and we can go right on." I protested that I had to eat on that dollar.

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"OK sonny, then you better take yoself off right here."

By contrast, I had walked five or six miles into a large town and suddenly felt nails being driven in my thigh, a cramp such as I had never had before. I had been passing the large plate-glass window of a hotel, in which a white-haired Negro bellhop had been standing. Bent over in pain out on the street, I felt myself being lifted, then supported, to hobble into the hotel, where my rescuer sat me in a large leather chair and massaged away my cramp. He refused the small change I tried to give him, saying "That's all right, that's all right."

Hank Myers, Jim and I were squatted down in the vast railway yards in Kansas City. Stan had gone to Montana, to dig potatoes, he said. I had been sick as a dog on the alkaline water at the Oklahoma Fair but had got through somehow. Jim turned up again at the Texas Fair in Dallas, still vaguely resentful, efficient, and sardonic. The Texas Fair marked the end of the season in that part of the country, and Gray had paid us off, saying he hoped to see us the next year. I collected my withholdings and felt rich, a feeling soon displaced when Gray handed me a letter from my father. He must have found Gray's home address through Laura; now he was in still one more rooming house in St. Paul and he needed money. I put five singles in an envelope with a note saying I wasn't sure of my next move. I had some satisfaction in repaying the five dollars he had given me a lifetime ago, as it seemed; but my satisfaction was troubled by the fact that my capital was substantially reduced by my gesture.

We had ridden up from Dallas on a flatbed truck, but it was taking us a long time to find out where the freights were going and when. We had to dodge around two or three times a day to keep out of the way of the yard cops. It was turning cold now in November; Hank was going home to northern Iowa, and Jim hinted at female hospitality in Minneapolis. Instructed by Jim, I discarded my suitcase for a blanket roll. "You can't hop no freight with that thing in one hand," Jim said, pointing to the old case.

We weren't alone in the yard. Real bums and transients needing transport like us would meet, exchange information about freight train movements, then part and meet again. The professionals claimed to know what would move and when, but often their information was faulty or malicious. After three days of

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uncertainty we decided that we would take the first empty that seemed to be going north, if only to get out of "this goddammed K.C." as Jim put it. The best bet was a train making up not far from where we were. We filled our water bottles at a standpipe, made up our rolls, and waited near the line for the train to begin to move. We had newspapers to wrap around our legs in the cold night.

I knew I was in for a trial. The line ran on a raised embankment of gravel, and the boxcar door would be well above that. Jim instructed me in technique: "I'll go first and open a door. Sometimes they stick. You come next, and Hank will be behind you. You have to run along that bank, throw your roll in, then heave yourself up, get it?"

At dusk, sure enough, the cars began to move, and so did we. You didn't get in when they were stopped because of the yard patrol. You knew a boxcar was empty if the door wasn't locked and sealed. Jim said, "Now," and began to trot. I ran after him, ready to pitch my roll as instructed. I saw Jim heave at a partially open door as the train began to gather speed, not much, but a lot to me running in the gravel. I was almost at the door, just beyond the turning rear wheels, when I stumbled and fell. Before I hit the ground, with visions of a gory death, Hank pulled me up and said, "Run, John. Get in quick." I did so, trembling, sweating and relieved beyond the telling to be alive and moving, my friends with me.

"You saved me," was all I could gasp at Hank. I felt foolish and ashamed.

"Nothing I wouldn't do for a mangy dog," Hank smiled.

"You go on tripping over your own feet, you'll end up a statistic," Jim said. Many died riding the rails in those years, one reason for the zeal of the yard police. The train finally cleared the yards and picked up speed. Jim slid the door open a few feet and studied the cloudy sky. "I still don't know if this mother is headed north or west. Can't see no sun at all." For the first time in weeks I could sit down with nothing to do. It was luxury, even if splinters from the wooden floor worked up through my blanket. Three miserable days were behind us, and I think the others were as tired out as I was. I didn't care what direction the train was taking. As it turned out, we were heading west and had to leap out

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somewhere in Arkansas to beat our way back and eventually north. "No place to nowhere," Jim said.

There would be many trips in many boxcars over the next few years, but trips and trains fade one into another. That fading I account for not through treacheries of memory, but through the similarities of the settings, which suggested the exits and entrances of characters in an excessively long play or opera. Sometimes the train would stop for no perceptible reason, and I would risk jumping down and raiding a stand of ripe field-corn, then rushing back to the boxcar before it began to roll. At other stops the car would be invaded by other travellers, men looking for work or professional vagrants moving to good weather before the northern winter arrived. Some would talk, but most were glum after trying to hit me for cigarettes or makings. I was always vaguely anxious that I didn't really know where the train was going, or why. It would stop, start up again, or shunt around in the yards of some small town somewhere. When the sliding door was shut, day and night were just about the same: there were no windows in boxcars. Often it was too cold for sleep. Newspapers wrapped around the legs helped, but sometimes they seemed to absorb the cold, not keep it out. I would get up, stretch, light my pipe, and watch the dim bundles sleeping near me, snoring or groaning against the swaying motion when the train got up to speed. Sometimes the strangeness was exciting, and sometimes it was threatening, for no reason I could put words to.

On that first journey, late one night on a siding, someone pushed into our car, grunted, and went to sleep. In the morning he saw that I had water in my canteen and offered me what he called "weed" in return for a swig. I didn't know what "weed" was, but Hank defined it for me: "Mary Jane, marijuana. Keep away from that gink. He's a wolf." I didn't know what a "wolf" was either. Hank said a wolf picked up stray young kids and travelled with them. I wasn't much enlightened, and asked why.

"They cornhole them," Jim said with disgust.

That enlightened me only dimly, but I gathered its meaning by intuition. The word sounded vile and in some dark way contributed to my growing resolve to settle in somewhere and go back to school. The theater of the boxcar soon lost any attraction; I knew I would have to make some other kind of life for myself. I was

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hungry for books again, for study, the only activity in which I had some competence. I had fled from the German and from my father's futilities, not from school.

Southern Iowa, and I decided I'd had enough boxcar vagaries. I said so long to Hank and Jim, jumped into a deserted freight yard, and headed for the little town, for groceries, and the road north. I would hitchhike to St. Paul and go back to school, provided I could find a night job. Two mornings later I rode into the South St. Paul stockyards perched above an enormous, stinking hog, my companion for the last several hours, the cab of the truck full of driver and friends. I took a streetcar to Laura's, asked her to rent me a room until I could find a job, and so rejoined the more or less conventional world.

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BERT O. STATES

Girl of My Dreams

Everyone called her "Y," or "Von," never Yvonne, except Miss Krider (Geography), who pronounced it "Ya-von." To me she was always Y, a single exquisite syllable, the sound made by the most erotic letter in the alphabet. It is hard now to think that we were together for such a brief time. Within a year of our first date (inexplicably a blur now), I went to one college, she to another, and I heard through friends that she married an Econ major from Philadelphia and that they have three children and own half of Scranton.

It was never what one could call a hot love, despite occasional bursts of appetite. To say the least, Y measured her favors carefully. Now and then, at a small dark party under the cover of Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw, I was given permission (or, not *denied* permission) to touch her "above the waist," but nothing beyond that and not often that. And always unpredictably. If once, then not the next time, or even the next; then without warning, passion would flare, and I would be allowed beneath both blouse and cup. Ecstasy!

Otherwise, every date followed the same pattern, as if the seed of our sad conclusion had been planted in advance in each episode. I am walking her home after the Saturday dance. It is a star-strewn summer night. The light from the street lamps on the corners falls in great chalk circles on the porch stoops, pavement, and mailboxes, broken only by the frenzied orbits of moths and bats. Otherwise, under the canopy of maple trees, the sidewalk is virtually dark between the street corners, the perfect invitation to love's last intimacies.

Each step brings us closer to her door and to my exile for another week, for there was no in-week dating beyond unplanned afternoon encounters at the community pool—in which we were not really "with" each other. And the main problem, reserved for this last block, is to secure a date for the following Friday or

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Saturday night, never both nights, because (I assume) back-to-back dates would be an overindulgence. And never before this last block, by my own choice, because if the answer were no the agony would bite even further into my remaining time with her. So this last block bears all the weight of my anxiety, which increases with each step. I am never invited into her house at night (her parents read in bed until eleven) and we never sit on the porch glider and talk, the rule being that when she is home she is home. So this is the moment that determines whether the coming week will be spent in wretchedness or sublime anticipation. And I am about to pop the question when, apropos of nothing—unless it is her anticipation that I am *going* to pop the question—she casually lets it fall, as though it were an upcoming driver's test, that next weekend she is going to M's farm with her mother and father. M's farm, to twist the knife, is also the summer residence of M's son Edgar, who is just home from college.

A chasm of silence.

"So I won't see you next weekend," I say flatly.

"Well, I can't help it. My father has it all planned." Pause. "I don't really want to go."

"Then don't go."

"I have to do what my father says."

"How boring. You're not a child."

Which was a stupid remark because now she has an opening to say, brightly,

"I don't know, it might be fun."

So we walk along, she cheerful, I in a disconsolate gloom, thinking that it will now be *at least* two Saturday nights—two weeks, fourteen days—before I see her, that any further arrangement will have to be made by phone (not good, for many reasons), and that on the coming Saturday night she and young Edgar M. would be walking, hand in hand, or arm in arm, or cheek to cheek, or thigh to thigh, along the bank of M's catfish pond at dusk to a chorus of peepers and frogs. Or worse.

As you can gather, Y's parents were very strict about her social comings and goings. She was to be home by nine weeknights (summer included) and eleven on weekends (Sunday excluded). On her part, Y was obliging to a fault, even to erring (like Shakespeare's Isabel) on the side of virtue. I bore this in silent fury. To find ourselves, say, at 10:45 on the home stretch, within

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two or three minutes (at most) of her door—having spent the evening at the dance or someone's party—and now alone for the first and only time, and *not* devour the remaining minutes in open-mouthed kisses in the dappled shade of the maple boughs was an insane waste of life. But this was not Y's style. If and when a good-night kiss came it was bestowed (regardless of what liberties had preceded it) as a concession to youth's rituals, like the punctuation to an orderly sentence, and if the downstairs lights were still on, there was no kiss at all, because kissing is not done where one can be seen. She simply pressed my arm or chest affectionately—intimately—with the faint incipient push backward, whispered " 'Night" (as if she were already late!), disappeared inside and was theirs again.

I was incapable of fathoming such allegiance. Two possibilities occurred to me: either she might be saving up these unused minutes of our time, like an allowance, in some sort of moral bank account against the promise of a visit to her beloved Uncle Avery in New York City (about whom she bragged endlessly), or her promptitude was to be laid at my own doorstep, not hers: could it be that I was the problem, not her parents? If I had been young Edgar M. would the case have been different? If so, why not simply break off our relationship, which was already frayed to snapping anyway? But this was Y all over again: the matter was simply undiscussable. Now and then it crossed my mind (and, in the interest of sanity quickly dismissed) that I was little more than a privileged escort, temporarily serving her modest youthful needs within the strict bounds of her upbringing (well, more or less) and the Grand Plan to see that she went to a good school and married well.

The phone calls in midweek simply repeated the pattern. Sometimes these were aimed at getting a date for the weekend, if I had somehow failed otherwise, and sometimes I called just to hear her voice. I would say, on the whole, that we averaged about 3.5 dates per month, the .5, or "half-dates," being the accidental afternoon encounters (it was a small town) usually with Millie and Harold who had "brought us together" (Millie was Y's best friend, Harold mine). But almost invariably there was one weekend a month that belonged strictly to her parents who were given to periodic trips out of town. It didn't make any difference whether these were one- or two-day trips; when they were planned the

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weekend was locked in and there was no date with Y. In any case, the turning point came in June of my senior year when I was about to leave for Oregon to spend the summer with my brother. Naturally, I call Y and ask if I can see her either Friday or Saturday night, figuring that while there is a certain gaucherie in asking for a *choice* of nights, it might be excused by the circumstances (my train was leaving Sunday).

Unfortunately, her beloved Uncle Avery "might" be coming to town from New York that weekend.

"Might?" I ask.

"Well, it's pretty sure."

"Both nights?"

"Well, that isn't certain yet." Pause.

"Could we make it for either night then?" I ask. "Otherwise I won't see you until August."

"Well, I'll see. Call me tomorrow." Then more chatter. And finally, as if an afterthought when we are about to hang up, she says, brightly, "Oh, guess who phoned me today."

"Who phoned you today?"

"Nick Altman."

Slow exhale. Nick Altman is a friend and teammate, our quarterback, point guard, 440 man, senior class president, and up until then the virtually promised-for-life "old man" of the legendary Cissie Whittaker. Now apparently on the prowl.

"Oh," I say, as the cancer spreads. "What did he want?"

"He asked if I would go out with him."

Big pause.

"And what did you say?"

"Oh, I said noooo."

Relief.

"I asked for a rain check."

"*A rain check*?"

"Well, what else could I say? I had to be nice."

"You might begin by saying that—"

"We're not going steady, you know."

"That's hardly my fault."

"Let's not discuss it. It's not a problem."

And that was that. It was the old One Shoe Drop at which she was a consummate master. Here I was about to leave for two long totally Y-less months with my brother and I have this new threat to

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contend with. And even though I got the date for Saturday night (Uncle Avery having rain checked himself), I knew that in all likelihood the second shoe would be dropped in a newsy letter in late August (her first—to my eighth) dealing with every subject (including beloved Uncle Avery) but the one I wanted to hear about, and it would end with a "PS: Nick sends his best," leaving the whole matter as provocatively ominous as the weekend with the M's.

And so it went. It seems my entire year was spent negotiating a time to see her, and whatever sweetness there was—even those precious moments "above the waist"—was compromised by a vague feeling that it might be the last. It is a terrible thing, longing. You can do nothing about it. It is not a neat crisp emotion, like anger or requited love. And there is no taking a breath without feeling it curling around your soul. Everything you do, everything you think, even your walk, is stunned with the ache of this deep absence.

Well, after a year of this, we "parted"—in fact on my return from Oregon where, indeed, I had received two summer bulletins from her (no mention of Nick, much of UA) which, now that I look back, I should have taken immediately as symptoms of withdrawal. And it all came to a sickening end one afternoon in her living room, of all places. Her father was at work and her mother shopping and I had come boldly to her house, unannounced, to claim her attention. We sat and talked and I knew there was something terribly terribly wrong.

"What's the matter?" I asked finally.

"Nothing."

"Something is."

"Not really."

It was unbearable to see her sitting there in the chair slipping into god knows what new world; so, in desperation, I crossed the room, knelt beside the ottoman, and without the least transition I kissed her on the mouth. And so one-sided was this kiss, so un-mutual and cold, that I knew it was the last I would ever have. She didn't move, she sat there stiffly in the chair, hands folded in her lap, as if enduring the dentist's probe—I on my knees bending over her—and *suffered it to happen.*

I went to Penn State, she to Goucher, and our paths never

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crossed again. I heard of her only at second hand through friends.

To my surprise the wound healed rapidly. I soon fell out of whatever it was I had been in, which had long since lost the name of love, and I ceased to think about her anymore. The years passed; the town and all it had been faded into memory. And of course there were others, and eventually marriage and children. Then, about a decade later, out of the blue, the first dream occurred. It was very simple. A group of us was going somewhere and Y was there. Nick Altman was also there, in the background, and Harold and Millie, and some others. Y was not with me, and it was clear that she was enjoying herself; and the feeling I had experienced that afternoon on the phone came back in full force, like a great D-minor chord from the sky, and I woke up, deeply troubled. And insatiably in love again.

This lasted until ten in the morning or so. Then everything returned to normal. But within a month, I had a second dream, then another, and another, sometimes two a month, if not 2.5 (because sometimes she simply wandered in and out of the dream like Alfred Hitchcock, mostly ignoring me). The dreams were always the same, or came to the same thing. The interesting thing is that they rarely returned to "the good old days." Rather, they took into account events that had since passed in such a way that the situation was always up-to-date, as if the whole affair were simply continuing. There is, for instance, the variation in which I see her at a reunion party. "Y is here," I am told quietly by Harold (who knows I will be interested), and before the words are out I have conceived the utmost, that she and I might, in view of what we had shared, time having passed, might now—. But then, she enters the room and I see that she has not come alone, that she is "with" (the most painful of all euphemisms!) a friend, a man, her fiancé, husband, who knows, and my despair soars. We greet each other: how have you been? and so on. Then, she says, "I'd like you to meet my et cetera." And I lean forward awkwardly, having not understood the dreadful word. But, as usual, the dream bungles the information, and I never find out who he is. So the conversation dwindles to updating our very separate lives (places lived, key events and so forth); gradually we are interrupted by the widening circle of her other friends, and I fade

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inconspicuously to the fringe. Finally, the crowd moves into another room, to joyful laughter, she at its center, and I am left alone. And as always I wake up hopelessly in love until mid-morning, mildly troubled until mid-afternoon.

Then there are the dreams (legion!) in which she does not appear at all. And these are the worst of the lot. I am wandering the streets of town alone on a Saturday night. What I am doing there is never clear, but I have come back many years after all this has passed into history, and I know this in the dream. And, inevitably, I am drawn, like a moth, to her house on the outside chance that she may, by some fluke, still be there. I had done this many times, of course, when Y actually lived there, sometimes directly after our dates, usually on nights when there had been no date. It was a risky practice because her house is also on a corner, bathed by abundant street light. It is a white two-story frame house with the usual front and side porches, bay window, and pitched roof with crenelations. Her bedroom is the front room of the second story; it has one window visible from the street, a thin rectangle of yellow light (if she is home and the shade drawn), dark if not (and if not, why not?). In the dreams the problem was always the same as it was in life: how to walk slowly past the house as if I'm simply someone going to a somewhere of my own, without the risk of being recognized—and yet have time to peer, as I pass, *into* the house, to see who is there—who *else* might be there—or, if it were my outrageous good fortune, to see her reading a book alone in the living room in the chair of my undoing. (Dreams are merciless in conjuring such hopes!) All of this while courting the possible disaster of being found at her house at this hour, *after all these years.* And, indeed, in one dream, this fear is grotesquely realized: as I am gaping into the windows of the side porch like a common prowler, I suddenly hear "Skip" (for that was my name), "is that you out there?" from her father who has been sitting quietly in the shadows on the porch glider. I shoot down the walk toward the creek without a word, trapped red-handed in my sin, shamed and desolated in the certain knowledge that my pitiful unmanly addiction to Y ("Won't he *ever* learn?") would be the principal topic at tomorrow's breakfast.

This series of dreams, like the others, was unbearably lugubrious, and usually accompanied by Shostakovitch's First Piano Concerto, which we (minus Y) played endlessly on rainy Sunday

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afternoons in Millie's apartment. There was rarely a sign of life in the house, or a shadow on her window shade. Everything was as forlorn as a Hopper painting. And through that mysterious understanding radiated in the images of dreams, I invariably had the realization that it was all over, that they didn't live there anymore, that the world had gone on to other things (her family to the grave, she to marriage and motherhood—I to my own life) yet this other part of me had remained behind skulking down this bleak street in search of something that had never been there to begin with. And so it went, through the years. Every dream came to the same end, a precise replica of what it had been in real life for a single brief year.

What a shock, then, that after a time the dreams faded out altogether, as the original relationship had, and there was, again, the peace of an apparent exorcism. All was absolutely normal. Then, suddenly one night, perhaps a year later, Y reappeared. But the dreams were different. They now took on certain nuances, as if now that she was gone, out of mind, now that nothing mattered, the dream might explore a new theme, being, I suppose, sick to death of the old one. I must add too that even in these dreams she was always eighteen, always *en fleur*, and usually wore a light frock that graced her magnificent shoulders and chest. Sometimes, as dreams often do, she appeared to be someone else, or as a composite of several vaguely similar people; but it was always Y, always the same history. In one dream, when she was entirely herself, we actually had a private lunch, and flickering around her dark eyes there was a suggestion that time had altered her attitude toward me. She became almost aggressively interested in me.

"Uncle Avery is gone, did you know?" she says.

"Oh, no! When?"

"Last fall. He was eighty-two."

"I'm so sorry. Well, he was much be—much loved," I say, my hopes rising rapidly, as if a great stone had been lifted from the path.

"I wish you had known him. You two are so alike."

"I'm flattered. In what way?" I ask, surprised by this.

"You're both literary people."

"As opposed to?"

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"To—oh, I don't know—business people. You know. Like me. I'm very—practical."

I smile, a pensive Paul Henreid grin. "Well, that's not all you are, Y."

This is said lowly, seething with innuendo.

"Oh? What else am I?"

She leans forward.

"You are incomparable," I say.

"Ouuu. I like that."

"An incomparable—witch."

"I—a witch?"

"An incomparable witch. It's a compliment."

"Some compliment. Isn't a witch usually a hag?"

"I mean witch in the sense of bewitch. You are magical. An eidolon. I sometimes doubt that you exist."

"I beg your pardon. I very much exist!" she says in fake hauteur.

"That's debatable."

We stare at each other.

"It's so good to see you," she says finally.

"The feeling is mutual," I say.

Her hand slips across the table and covers mine.

I cover hers with my other hand.

She covers mine with her other hand.

She snickers and suddenly we are playing the revolving stack of hands game, and laughing hilariously in a way we had never laughed before.

Oh god! I think. *I must have her!* It is unfair, it is tragic that anything should be between us but the sweat of love.

Then, abruptly, my wife is shaking my shoulder.

"What?" I mumble, waking.

"You were laughing in your sleep," she says.

"Sorry."

"Turn over."

In another dream she seeks me out at a party, genuinely pleased to see me, all nostalgia, and I learn that her husband, Et Cetera, had died, of all things, of cancer of the tonsils. (She is still eighteen, of course, and I am as usual spouseless in these dreams.) Things are looking up, but for some stupid reason I am again unable to take advantage of this electrifying news, and nothing comes of it. But the dream gives me the impression that

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it is only a matter of time before good things happen. In still another dream I am at a strange bazaar, foraging through some leather goods. And suddenly, across the way I see her, back turned, trying on a straw hat at one of the stalls. Quickly I am at her side and touch her shoulder. She turns, and it is Kim Novak. But this does not fool me. I know she is also Y because of her dark eyes.

And so it went until, finally, The Dream to end all dreams. And though there were others after it, they were all weak reruns of earlier dreams, casual meetings, brief encounters that seemed on the whole to peter out on the same note of promise. In this incomparable dream, however, I am visiting Millie and Harold, who have gone on to marry and now live in a rambling fieldstone farmhouse in lower Eastern Pennsylvania. And marvel of all marvels, *Y is there!* Imagine my disbelief. Y is actually there, and I can see instantly that she is pleased I am there as well. There we are, the four of us, sitting outside on the lawn at dusk in wide-armed Adirondack chairs, sipping wine, a chorus of cicadas whirring out of the trees behind the house and blending with Artie Shaw's "Dancing in the Dark" on the record player inside. And we look out on the flat green Pennsylvania fields bordered by rows of feather duster elms, all bathed by an incandescently clear moon, Y haloed in its light like a temptress in a Munch etching. Here, I think, is the sublime moment. By the fortuitous mathematics of chance we were together, two pairs, alone, and we were in an alien corner of Pennsylvania coincidentally visiting understanding friends. And, unbelievably, we were to be overnight guests in the same house. A dream of a dream. At length, it is time to retire, Millie and Harold to their room, Y and I to separate rooms on the opposite wing of this conveniently long and private Colonial home with narrow halls, deep windowsills and countless bedrooms with fluffy patchwork quilts. And as we reach the top of the staircase before her door, buoyed by that wondrous power given to anonymous places to coax us out of our deepest hesitations, and by a telepathic conviction that the two of us were finally of one mind, I say to her, there in the hallway,

"Y—"

She turns. "Yes?"

"May I come to your room?"

A beguiling, mock-reproachful smile. "Is that a good idea?"

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"It's an excellent idea. Please!"

Pause.

"Please!"

She thinks, her head cocked, her lips curled in a pout, then she touches my chest gently with her fingers, as of old. "Give me a few minutes," she whispers, and goes quietly into her room, whether to ponder the "idea" further or to prepare for its arrival I can't be sure. But in a few minutes I knock, am admitted, and in another moment we are in the same bed, and there in this speechless slow-motion dream, dovetailed in her naked arms, I experience a vertigo of richest expectation.

The dream, Gérard de Nerval once said, is our second life. The wonder is that both of our lives are equally real while we are living them. So we are peculiarly endowed with two separate existences, one of which—the dream life—feeds off the other but does not know that the other exists. It is also said that the creatures of our dreams are our similars. We make them up out of the parts and shards of people we have known in our first life and in the dream they stand in for our deepest desires and fears. But they are all images of the self in disguise, offering us only what is truly on the dreamer's mind. And so it was that my dream of Y simply stopped on the giddy verge of its promise: no sooner were Y and I in bed together than I was flung wide awake and she was gone. Try as I might I could not bring her back as anything more than a tepid daydream artificially induced in the empty night of my first life. As in those falling dreams in which you waken before you reach earth because they are about falling, not about dying, the dream had exploited its theme in perfect faith. Y was my Y to the end, as I had created her in the beginning—not a girl I had once longed for, but longing itself.

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WILMER MILLS

The Shoeshine Man's Romance

I love the lady with the Spanish boots.
She came to live at Mrs. Carter's house,
That's where I live. It happened early when
I take my box and chair to work. She stood
Outside and Mrs. Carter took her in.
I missed her name from walking out so fast.
The sun was up and made the screen porch bright,
And light was like it came up out of the ground.

So I just called her Dawn from there on out,
Just to myself though. I don't ever talk.
I'm not a crazy like they say. It's not
My fault the words they use don't suit me, not
Much use for words out loud if you ask me.
I read my books when I get home at night
And haven't spoken since my brother's shoes.
Still have the scars between my nipples like
A lesson to me, what he said, if I
Should ever try to clean his shoes again.
I told him I learned good. I said I learned
That blood is sticky until it dries. That made
Him mad again—but I don't want
To write about that now.

I like the dreams my Mamma used to have.
One time she said God came on horseback, dressed
Like Zorro, then he cracked his whip and said,
"I'm Zorro, I steal from d' rich and give to d' poor!"
Then I was born and all her dreams were changed.
One night she reached for porcelain doorknobs
And when they opened it was Jesus there.
He'd come to get her. Mamma said she'd been

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The whore of Babylon but Jesus made
Her white as snow. His feet are always dirty
In the Bible. Mamma said you have
To keep them clean. I do my best and practice
Every day in case he comes for me.

It's only two miles to the grocery store.
I walk it every day, or when it's clear.
That time the lady came to stay the sun
Was up and yellow where the road goes east.
The cars go by so fast, and people make
Strange faces at you down the side of the road.
But that day I was looking at the sun
Because right then it lit behind a beech tree
Where the fall leaves seemed to be on fire.
And in the sun itself my eye turned orange,
Blue, then green, like nothing I've seen yet.
It made me wonder if it had to do
With Dawn, the lady with the Spanish boots,
Because I'd never given anyone
A name before, not even to myself.

The manager lets me sit beside the store.
I got a kit and caboodle, oil, rags,
Polish, brushes. Sometimes I sit for hours,
Waiting. People walk by with their shoes.
There's every kind of shoe and most are dirty.
I like watching shiny things and here
The parking lots are full of sparkly cars.
Bright sunlight on them always makes me sneeze,
Sometimes three in a row. I like it though
Because it makes the blood rush all across
My body for a second and I bet
A hundred million seconds strung together
Feels like sleeping when it rains at night.

I got home late that day
And Mrs. Carter wanted me to shine
The lady's boots, that she'd been walking, would

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I be so kind. It made me happy like
I'd never been before and down the hall
The air got tight inside my chest, got hard
To breathe like being stung by lots of bees.
But I was happy and the air went down
My throat in gulps and I was thinking how
She'd know that I was there to shine her boots,
That maybe Mrs. Carter told her I'd
Come by her room to get them. So I knocked
But no one answered and I knocked again
And still there wasn't anyone inside.

So I just went on in to get the boots.
But she was there all right. The air got tight
Again and everything got slow as if
The seconds were an hour so I saw
The all of it and won't forget it ever.
She had lit the room with candles, and what
I didn't know was how the bathtub sat
Beside the fireplace, and there wasn't curtains.
She was on the tub rim facing me,
Still wet, a towel wrapped up around her head,
And I just stood there frozen for a minute
Since the air had altogether quit.
I saw the Spanish boots beside her chair
And picked them up and took them to my room.

All that was months ago. She moved away
So I just think about the night I shined
Her boots. Just started writing this today,
Don't know why yet, but it's important how
I lit my candles too that night and took
My rags and brushes out, and then I don't
Remember anything about the boots.
My hands worked all the while in candlelight
And I got lost in every kind of shine,
The morning kind, the midday kind, late day
And evening. All I thought about was how
She sat there on the rim of the tub with light

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All over her as if it came from deep
Inside her body. And because I saw
Her shine like that and since I shined her boots
It made me full of light, a morning sun.
It felt like lots of sneezes all at once.
It felt like sleeping when it rains at night.

Now I'll just have to write it down because
She left, and I don't talk. But if I spoke,
What would I say? Her name? I'd like to tell
About how Jesus needed water poured
Across his feet because he walked so much.
At least it's down on paper though, as if
My voice had done it. I'll just fold it up
And slide it back behind the wallpaper splice
And then nobody knows. Nobody has
To know I saw her full of light or think
I loved the lady with the Spanish boots.

The Tent Delivery Woman's Ride

My daughter asked me if I've always been
A tangled woman. I told her insanity
Could be hereditary, that you get it
From your children. I've been asked to be
A sweeter person for my daughter's sake
But damned if I'll go back to that again.
Besides, I like the way I am just fine.
She called me "tangled," like the piles of rope
I haul around for men to pitch the tent-
Pavilion sets on wedding party lawns.
It's great to see the lines go up and tight
On temporary buildings, then to see
Them all torn down again. It's been my job
To drive the truck around. I like it fine.

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Today I crossed the carcass of a dog
And all around it purple butterflies
Were spiraling. They splattered on my truck
And so tonight I brought a few inside.
The wings of one were still in motion, lifting
Up and down. I held it to the light
And saw its knotted patterning of lines,
Like stitches Mother tried to teach me once
Before I ran away. I hated knots,
And looking at the butterfly got me
Upset again, enough to take the truck
Across that river bridge with all the rows
Of yellow guard-rail lights. I had in mind
To swerve against the side and shoot on past
The safety lights, another kind of tit for tat,
But what's the use in one more way to die?
I kept on going.
Now it's three A.M.
And I've been driving with the windows down
Across the northern Alabama line.
Feels like I'm being pulled this way somehow,
My destiny by accident, like once
Back home, my mother left her knitting work
In the kitchen, walked outside and saw the end
Of yarn was caught around her shoe.
I feel like that, pulled out, unraveled,
But I like it fine.

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DICK DAVIS

Iran, Twenty Years Ago

Each summer, working there, I'd set off for
The fabled cities—Esfahan, Kashan,
Or Hamadan, where Hephaestion died,
The poets' towns—Shiraz and Nayshapour,
Or sites now hardly more than villages
Lapped by the desert, Na'in or Ardestan . . .

Their names now mean a dusty backstreet somewhere
Empty and silent in the sunlight's glare,
A narrow way between the high mud walls—
The worn wood of the doors recessed in them
A talisman to conjure and withhold
The life and lives I never touched or knew.
Sometimes I'd hear a voice, a radio,
But mostly there was silence and my shadow
Until a turn would bring me back to people,
Thoroughfares and shops . . .

Why is it this that stays,
Those empty afternoons that never led
To anything but seemed their own reward
And are more vivid in my memory
Than mosques, bazaars, companionship, and all
The myriad details of an eight year sojourn;
As if that no epiphany, precisely,
Were the epiphany? As Hafez has it,
To know you must have gone along that way;
I know they changed my life forever but
I know too that I could not tell myself
—Much less another—what it was I saw,
Or learnt, or brought back from those sunlit hours.

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Shadows

The sun comes up, and there
The night's thin fall of snow
Fades from the grass as if
It could not wait to go.

But look, a lank line lingers
Beyond the lawn's one tree,
Safe in its shadow still,
Held momentarily.

Delighted my daughter runs
Twisting from my embrace
To touch the fragile snow
Before it leaves no trace.

Night Thoughts

For some, and maybe the majority,
I know reality
Means what preoccupies their waking hours—
But not for me

For whom the real is not light's rapid rush
Of chance and change, day's crush
Of difficulties, duties, deals, distractions—
But the still hush

Of darkness where my grateful mind has grown
One with the monotone
Of whispered breath beside me where you sleep
Embraced, alone.

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Haydn and Hokusai

Masters of wit and line
Who welcome what is ugly,
Lumpish, disproportionate,
And give it grace, distinction—
Whose humor is a pool
For all of us to splash in
(And we emerge like angels
Double-dipped in Pactolus
To shimmer in bright air
That is and is not earthly . . .)

Haydn and Hokusai,
Who say to Anguish "Go!
Out! *Retro me Satanas!*"
Though you, and more than most,
Have seen its rodent eyes
Burn in the icy dark,
And felt the fetid blast
Of dragon breath assail
Your heart, hearing the slaver
Of wide hyena jaws—

Haydn and Hokusai
Be with me now, lighten
My lumpen moods, drive off
Ungainly panics, spleen,
Purge me of selfish torpor;
Remind me that you loved
Life's dailiness, its quirks
And frumpish joy; and that
If there is heaven on earth
It's here, it's here, it's here.

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ALAN SULLIVAN

Doña Salinas en Oaxaca

El Presidente's regal spouse,
Her pumps and gown fiesta green,
Exits the gilded opera house
But waves away her limousine.
Officers sporting braids and spats
Cordon her path across the square
Where dancers brandish peasant hats
And off-key trumpets gaily blare.

An odd, impromptu air prevails
As though the lady, on a whim,
Might order felons freed from jails
Or haul her heelers up the rim
Of Monte Alban's templed hulk
Hanging over the city's edge—
A Catholic matron come to skulk
Past altars black with sacrilege.

Mestiza girls watching her pass
Sigh for her pure Castilian skin,
Hallmark of the *caudillo* class:
An old conceit worn whitewash thin
Though braced by faith and bandoleers,
By *Federales* breaking strikes
While technocratic racketeers
Bribe Pancho Villa lookalikes.

If whispers of hypocrisy
Trouble her stroll on spotless streets,
The pleasures of authority
Surely outweigh the self-deceits;
Yet always she must sense the dead—

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Conquistadors and Aztec kings
Clamoring in her coiffured head
For their ancestral reckonings.

Behind her trail two ribboned floats
Drawn by a band of Zapotecs
Whose drum and flute strike festive notes
But lift no yokes from restive necks.
The painted paper saints proclaim
Convergence of the Church and State
As though the Revolution's flame
Never had singed a potentate.

No revolution alters men;
Even a constitution fails
To safeguard every citizen
When justice loads her crooked scales
With rank ratings of race or caste
And bias buys a swift appeal.
Call me a crass iconoclast
But I distrust the commonweal.

My forebears braved the same green sea
Columbus sailed for God and Spain,
Though less in love with liberty
Than yearning for unfettered gain.
They would have built a Mexico,
Suspicious, clannish, proud and cruel,
Replicating the *status quo,*
An Old World's autocratic rule.

Suspecting in Her Excellence
The family traits I most deplore—
Delusions of significance,
Anxieties and needs at war—
I watch her starched procession cross
A plaza heaped with hand-dug dirt,
Public works for some local boss
Who toadies in a well-stuffed shirt.

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Provincial tours with nightly fetes,
Ribbon-cuttings, flamenco shows
Keep the President's party pets
Off their backsides, on their toes.
Her Excellence must shake their hands,
Mend disputes and praise dull wives,
Pretend she truly understands
The complications of their lives.

Visions of uncontested rank
Enticed her when electors met,
But duties grew and freedoms shrank
After her husband won his bet.
Now the "progressives" criticize
His coterie of shills and flacks
While grandees fear he'll privatize
The linen jackets off their backs.

Yet jasmine blossoms still smell sweet;
Cathedral bells ring down the dusk.
Few children cry for scraps to eat
When corn ripens in every husk.
Construction crews with sewer lines
Should placate shanty discontent.
As for the wealth of wells or mines,
That belongs to the government.

Pinstriped bankers flocking south
And tourists clapped at swank resorts
Put milk in the mild infant's mouth
No matter what the press reports.
Dastardly, the *auto-da-fé*
Of gossip on the gutter news:
Evita Caught In Cabaret;
Imelda Packs Her Thousand Shoes.

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PETER MAKUCK

Line Squall

I had forgotten it again,
the *it* that is always,
Gensha says,
to be used
and slides like invisible thread
through the slightest moments
until the picture
window put me in mind:

a wedge of weather
in fast advance,
a movement
of clouds on the boil
turning the sunny waters
of Bogue Sound
green, indigo,
and black again

with a long line
of white ibis
languidly rowing
right to left,
their long necks
arrowed away
and unaware
of invisible thread
or the air
flickering like welding
in high school shop,
something on the build
and emerging
with sandspit islands exposed

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one after another
by the outgoing tide
and a smoke-blue heron,
tall spirit
of the shallows,
always alert.

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MICHAEL LIND

Messengers: An Ode

Abruptly, it will be
atop the cornice, blinking
into my office—a sea gull,
a blowzy, prinking
apparition, like the skull
in Arcady, diverting reverie
to otherness—in this case, to marine
translucencies far from the fax machine.

Like gulls, the messengers
confound us in our practiced
routines, startling as upstart flowers
in chalky, cactused
ruts. The voice of higher powers,
a walkie-talkie simmers, crackles, purrs
direction to this haughty boy, whose smirk
has ancestors in Botticelli's work;

a ripple follows him, through rows
of desks, as flexing muscles wrapped
in black-and-purple tights divert
the women and some men. He knows,
he must, that he's peeled by the rapt
receptionists who act so curt.

Conceited couriers
—each advertised as peerless,
unique, by his heraldic garb:
this guy's a cheerless
Zulu ninja, dressed to perturb
in mask-like goggles; key-chains echo spurs
accompanying the swagger of that pard
whose look is Stetson, jersey, leotard.

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Their uniforms mock ours,
our rep ties and our jackets
or overalls. They flaunt their grace,
these knights of packets
who bear down on us mid-race
outside on sidewalks at lunch hours,
a whoosh the only warning, not a bell,
and then we're nearly clipped. They spool, pell-mell,

through car-stampedes, they flag and tease
the snorting trucks, and pedal on
with order, deposition, plan,
kid brothers of Pheidippides,
the messenger of Marathon.
His heart staggered, yet still he ran.

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ROBIN S. CHAPMAN

Studying Mountains

Under the whispering trees he limps,
Brown-furred, white-rumped, black cap and antlers,
Four points on one side, three on the other,
Stumbling a bit in the snow.

Kneels on a little promontory
As though he is too tired or hungry or cold
To go farther, trees already browsed well over his head,
The hoof-raked snow yielding only last year's needles,
A month of thirty and forty below behind him;
Or perhaps it is simply noon, and time for his usual rest.

Now he beds down,
His head raised for long minutes looking out
At the mountain.
And now he lowers his head,
Stretching his neck, a sort of bow, laying it
On the snow, where he lies long minutes
As though he were dying, or giving up, or sleeping.

And now again he raises his head to that still, high face
Of the mountain that, dying or living, he chooses to see.
The sun picks out the fuzz of his antlers,
Down of his muzzle, black of his nose, brown of his eyes.

His ears flick to the sound of my chair shifting;
He looks at me, a shadow behind glass, then turns his
head back;
Slowly, his jaws begin to chew,
And I turn back to my work.
And now the sun has moved on;
There's only the mark on the ground where this long balance

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Was struck.
Studying mountains, I too, feel
The body begin to loosen
Deep in its roots, flowing with what rises
Through the small dark body of the mule deer
From the immense dark body of the earth.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

I Remember, I Remember

(Poem beginning with two lines by Yehuda Amichai)

The earth drinks people and their loves
like wine, in order to forget.
But I drink wine to remember.

I remember the day at school I thought
I had appendicitis. My father came,
supported me on both sides to the car,

into the doctor's. For that, when Gabriel
blows his horn, may Father be supported
on both sides to Heaven.

I remember the sensation of first love,
like falling down a mine shaft.
But shafts are dark, and all around

me was light, light, light. Her hair,
light, and when we locked together
we were a dynamo generating light.

I remember not knowing what I wanted to do
in life. My ambitions scattered like newspapers
on lawns of people out of town,

until I had the right professor for
the right course. Suddenly I was on course
for what I'd do until the day I die.

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I remember the day we were wed. In early
morning I walked down Marshall Street,
wanted to proclaim to everyone I met,

"I'm marrying a woman who makes me laugh,
a beautiful woman good as fresh-baked bread,
pure as a beach where no one walks."

I remember the day our son was born,
the longest day and night and day
of my life—imagine how long for her!

When the nurse brought our son to the window,
I was Robinson Crusoe discovering Friday's
footprint: stranger, companion, friend.

I remember, sometimes more than I care to,
the friend I let down unintentionally,
the brothers I hurt through simple silence,

the mother I didn't call often enough when
she was bedridden, weak as water. I even
remember a dog who wanted to play. I didn't.

I remember the day it was confirmed
one of my friends had been telling
lies about me for years—

They cost me friends, a job.
May his tongue be ripped out
and flung to the crows.

I collect memories the way some collect coins,
memories fading like constellations at dawn.
Until my next glass of wine.

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FLOYD SKLOOT

Toomey's Diner

Sundays at dawn were whispers and silent
pissing on the inside of the privy bowl.
If belt buckles merely clicked, zippers
crept shut, and the heels of heavy shoes
only thudded together muffled in our hands,
mother slept on as we crept out the door.

Sunday mornings my face seemed to melt
in ripples of chrome circling high stools
at the bar of Toomey's Diner. The air
inside was thick with breath and smokes
as I spun between my father and brother
waiting for our *flapjacks all around.*
I saw the soles of my feet turned upside
down in the stools' silvery pedestals
and knew enough to spin without a squeak.

So this was the world outside. Red leather
to sit on, red formica edged in chrome
where my elbows fit, red menus studded
with paper clips. Signs said Special Today.
This was the stuff of weekday dreams. A small
jukebox at every table, rice to keep
the salt dry, toothpicks, a great pyramid
of cereal boxes hiding the cook.
Sunday was sizzling grease and apple juice
glowing pink, then blue in the sudden shift
of neon. Sunday laughter gave off such
heat that walls burst with sweat.

When the day came apart, I always had
the relative silence of knives and forks

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on plates, the delicate lids of syrup holders
snapping shut, coffee slurped from steaming mugs,
coins on the counter, the sound of our bill
skewered by Toomey as we turned to leave.

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JAMES BAKER HALL

This Kiss

for a good part of the school year the bus arches
over the rise in front of our house kissing the brakes
in the dark
when I'm not there to watch
I listen
each year the regular driver handles
the bus in the same way day after day
almost exactly and you can tell a lot
about the condition of the hilly curvy road
the bus-sound accelerating and braking
we hear it oh how long less than a minute
if I miss seeing the school bus
in front of the house whooshing past
in a long second I usually catch the taillights
topping the next hill up the road
in the past with running lights
but not this year
we live way back far out
the driver
this year kisses the brake
as she tops that hill
a secret among us
that only a poem could celebrate
well no you and I do independently
and when we compare notes together
the new driver turns off the inside lights too
in years past there was a one-trick carnival
at 7:06 yellow running lights ferris-wheeling
the long yellow cab of mostly empty seats all lit up
a roller coaster midway on a three-rise roll
now with only headlights and taillights
there's something otherworldy at that moment

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and much more urgent a little spectral at times
I hate that creeping in
without moonlight there's no yellow none
I've never understood how long those rides are
or how desolate those two kids
one way up here and the other way over there
in there in the dark now so dark that even in moonlight
you wouldn't know they were in there unless you knew
if I say one more thing I'll make myself sad
such are my thoughts outside your cracked door
you're in there clicking away I've just stopped by
to say whatever comes out of my mouth
this kiss blown through the opening

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RICHARD HORNBY

Ireland Your Ireland

IS IRELAND A REAL PLACE, or is it a literary construct? I have never been there; perhaps it is an invention of great writers like Yeats, Joyce, Synge, O'Casey, and Friel. Or perhaps it does exist, but in reality is as dull as Dubuque, with none of the magic, humor, or tragedy I automatically associate with it. The reason for my question is that the best young Irish playwright today has actually spent little time there since infancy, yet his depiction of rural Irish life seems just as vivid and poignant as what we have become used to. All the elements that make Ireland a great place to read about but a horrible place to live—the drink, sexual guilt, Catholic rigidity, obsession with the past, eloquence, violence—are found in abundance in the plays of Martin McDonagh, who, though of Irish extraction, is actually a Londoner.

I saw McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy* in London last September, in a co-production of the Druid Theatre Company of Galway, Ireland, and the Royal Court Theatre. The three plays are all set in contemporary Ireland, in Leenane, a small town in Connemara, County Galway; although there is some minor overlapping of characters, each play tells an independent, beautifully crafted story.

The Lonesome West involves two brothers, living alone in their father's house after his recent death, who get into massive, often violent disputes over the most trivial of topics. An alcoholic but concerned priest finally arranges a truce, but it soon deteriorates; even their apologies become a contest in self-abasement, and before long the two are lunging for their guns and knives. It is impossible not to see the play as an allegory of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, each side hot tempered and self-righteous, locked in strife that they can never escape, but the allegory would also fit India and Pakistan, or Israel and the Palestinians, or maybe the entire, murderous human race.

The theme of homicidal family strife runs through the other two plays of the trilogy as well. In *A Skull in Connemara*, a man has the ghoulish job of digging up bones from the local cemetery, to make room for new arrivals. When the time comes for him to dig up those of his late wife, the rumors of his possible involvement in her death resurface, especially when her skeleton turns up missing from its coffin. In the end, it appears that her death was accidental, but enough wallops have been exchanged among the living to establish Leenane once again as a brutal, albeit hilarious, little community.

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, a plain forty-year-old virgin named

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Maureen Folan lives with her whining, tyrannical old mother in a dreary rural cottage. Maureen seethes with resentment, which she expresses with insults, withholding of food, and outright violence, burning the old woman's hand on the stove. After a one-night stand with Pato Dooley, a man she has known for twenty years—it took him that long to get up the nerve to approach her—Maureen flaunts her newly released sexuality to her disgusted mother: "You'll have to be putting that thing of yours in me again before too long is past, Pato." In fact, the fellow was impotent; these Irish cannot enjoy sex even fleetingly.

Pato goes off to England, because there is no work for him locally. He sends Maureen a long, devoted letter via his brother Ray, with instructions to hand it to her in person. In the event, Ray, bored and impatient, leaves it with the mother, who reads and burns it. Eventually, however, she inadvertently reveals the existence of the letter to Maureen, who brains the old witch with a poker, passing off her death as an accident. It is too late for Maureen to get Pato, however, who in the interim has become engaged to another woman.

McDonagh is a young playwright, still in his twenties, but he has a wonderfully old-fashioned sense of dramaturgy, setting up powerful conflicts between close family members (Aristotle felt that tragedy works best when the protagonist injures someone near and dear), and working them out with impeccable skill. He uses the traditional structure of a late point of attack (in family feuds that have been going on for years), rising action, climax, and denouement, with each incident carefully motivated. The mother's burning of the letter, for example, is not an expression of simple malice, but more of her fear that if Maureen married Pato, she would no longer be willing to care for the old woman. Despite the tragic structure, however, and the disastrous climax, *Beauty Queen*, like McDonagh's other plays, is funny; the sly strategies operating in the letter scene had the audience guffawing, and led to Tony Awards for both the actors when it came to New York.

McDonagh's craftsmanship applies to his characterizations as well as his plots. You cannot find him in his plays (and why should you, since he is no Irishman); he totally gives himself up to his characters, who have a marvelous spontaneity and independence. When his writing rises to eloquence, as it often does, it always seems like the *character's* eloquence. When Pato says "You can't kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year," or Maureen says of Pato, "So long as it's you and me, and the warmth of us cuddled up, and the skins of us asleep, is all I ever really wanted anyway," it is not the rhetoric of a Wilde or a Shaw, speaking through the characters, but a giving of voice to unique individuals who, though neither well educated nor well read, nonetheless have a distinctive way of putting words together.

When the London production of *Beauty Queen* came to New York last winter, it did so well off-Broadway that it moved on to Broadway in the spring, going on to win four Tony Awards in June. Marie Mullen won Best Actress for her gutsy performance as Maureen, while Anna Mana-

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han and Tom Murphy won Best Featured Actress and Actor for playing the mother and Ray. Garry Hynes won Best Director, but the play itself lost out to Yasmina Reza's *Art*. Since *Beauty Queen* enabled its director and actors virtually to sweep the Tonies (if it had a leading male role its performer probably would have taken Best Actor too), it ought to follow that the script was a pretty fair piece of writing, but perhaps the Tony Committee was put off by the traditional, Aristotelian construction. Skillful playwriting is definitely passé with the American theatrical establishment.

Or perhaps, with *Art*, the Committee was excited by middle-brow pretentiousness. Mencken said that nobody ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses, and French playwright Reza has reportedly made seventeen million dollars from her phony little play, which has just been sold to the movies. It deals with a Parisian dermatologist named Serge who pays 200,000 francs (about $32,000) for a large painting that is solid white except for some faint off-white diagonal lines. His friend Marc calls it shit. A third friend, Yvan, is enlisted by both to support their sides. Yvan's vacillating and equivocating make up of most of the play's brief action, which culminates in fisticuffs, as well as Marc's defacing of the painting with magic marker, though eventually the friends reconcile.

The trouble with this ninety-minute journey to nowhere is that it is immediately apparent that Serge bought the painting solely to be fashionable, so that we never for an instant identify with him or his position. He hems and haws, occasionally tossing off shallow or inappropriate terms like "resonance," "incredibly modern," or even "deconstruction," but his friend Marc is even more vague and repetitious in attacking the painting, finding its shortcoming obvious. Since none of the three characters knows anything about art, nobody seems right; Serge is a fool for buying a dubious painting, Marc is a wretch for being so brutally honest with an old friend, and Yvan is a spineless simpleton. The question of what is art has been pondered by great thinkers for over a century, and works like this white-on-white painting have been around since the 1910s, but none of that long experience finds its way into the play at all. *Art* does not satirize modern art and its defenders, but only condescends to them, so that the audience can feel superior without having to think.

Sean Connery's wife spotted *Art* in its original Parisian production, then convinced her husband to produce it. Translated by Christopher Hampton, a very good playwright best known for *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, with Tom Courtenay as Serge and Albert Finney as Marc, the play sold out for months in advance in London, which is unusual there. The New York production had Victor Garber as Serge and Alan Alda as Marc, who were easily the equals of Courtenay and Finney, plus Alfred Molina, who got a Tony nomination for playing Yvan. Reza could not have asked for better talent in both London and New York, demonstrating that the weaknesses of *Art* trace back to the script alone. It is ridiculous to take

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this boulevard comedy seriously as a work of art or art criticism; the play itself is more bogus than Serge's painting.

The plays and film about Oscar Wilde that have come out lately all stress his role as gay martyr. Since he got two years in a brutal Victorian prison merely for acts performed with consenting adults, also losing his home, career, income, and contact with his wife and children, Wilde would certainly qualify for that description. Nonetheless, the interesting thing is that Wilde did not think of himself as being homosexual. The best of the many books that have come out on Wilde in this decade, Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century*,[1] convincingly argues that the very concept of the existence of a special category of human beings with an innate attraction to their own sex was unknown until the 1860s, and not widely known until after Wilde's trials in 1895. Of course, homosexual *acts* were identified, being prohibited both in the Bible and in law, but not homosexual *people*. In conversation with Frank Harris after the trials, Wilde blamed his homosexual behavior not on his inner nature, but on his wife's pregnancies, which made her unappealing.

The best thing about the recent film *Wilde*, starring the superb Stephen Fry, is that it shows Wilde as a kind and loving husband and father, who adored his wife and children, and they him. (The worst thing is that it also shows Wilde as a voyeur, watching his friend and former lover Lord Alfred Douglas having anal intercourse with another man; there is no evidence that this tasteless event ever took place.) He did not marry as a cover, nor in the naive belief that marriage would convert him; in fact, it appears that he did not have sex with men until after he married. Pinning a clinical label on Wilde that he would not have used himself reduces a man known for his greatness of soul. Similarly, treating the homosexual undercurrents that can be found in all of Wilde's major works as if they were dominant themes reduces a great writer to a producer of political tracts.

Now David Hare, a major political playwright, has weighed in with a play about Wilde entitled *The Judas Kiss*, which transferred from London to Broadway in the spring, featuring the charismatic Irish star Liam Neeson. The first act takes place in 1895, in Wilde's London hotel room just after the first trial, which was against Douglas' father for libel in calling Wilde a "somdomite" [*sic*]. I was intrigued that Hare would start a play about the most famous homosexual in history with a heterosexual couple (a porter and a chambermaid) indulging in oral sex on the bed, before Wilde and his party have arrived. In fact, the event proves dramatically gratuitous, except possibly to debunk the traditional view of the Victorians as sexless. The focus shifts to Wilde himself, who has only a few hours to flee the country, since evidence surfaced at the trial that Wilde had indeed had sex with men. Wilde's old friend Robbie Ross tries

[1] *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York, 1994).

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desperately to get Wilde to leave before being arrested, but Wilde lingers, partly to appease Douglas (or "Bosie"), who loathes the idea of victory for his despised father, and partly from a martyr complex.

Act Two is set in Naples in 1897, after Wilde's release from prison. Wilde's health is shattered, and both he and Bosie are broke, though this does not prevent the latter from enjoying the sexual favors of a young fisherman. Wilde is depicted as self-pitying and resentful, against Bosie for not having provided financial support at the trial and now in their squalid lodgings, as well as against friends who are trying to "help" by changing him morally: "I am punished not for my sin but because I have refused to learn the lesson of the sin." The couple separate bitterly, with the ailing Wilde having only a few years to live.

The play thus has a strong gay liberationist thrust. Wilde accepts himself for what he is, while those who do not are betrayers, Judases. Bosie betrays not only by his failure to provide support, but because he will not acknowledge his own homosexuality: "It is not in my nature to love men—only a phase." These are strange words coming from the young man who introduced Wilde to homosexual brothels! The term used for homosexuality throughout the play is "invert," which was then just coming into use by sexologists like Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis; again, it is unlikely that the real-life Wilde ever used it, or even heard it. The idea was that a male homosexual was a woman in a man's body (and a lesbian vice versa), but there is nothing in the play to suggest that Wilde is effeminate, especially as played by the strapping Neeson. All in all, *The Judas Kiss* might have been a good piece of social realism if it dealt with contemporary homosexuals, but it fails to do justice to the complexity of Victorian attitudes about sex, or indeed, to the intricacies of human sexuality generally.

Middle-aged actresses have long complained about the lack of good roles available to them. Lately women playwrights have been trying to provide them, but the narrow focus on women's issues usually yields what would once have been called women's plays, i.e., soap operas. Joanna Murray-Smith's recent *Honour*, a Broadway vehicle for Jane Alexander, with its tired themes of marriage versus career and marital infidelity, would have been the talk of my mother's bridge club had it been produced around 1948.

Gus, a successful journalist who writes a column for a major newspaper, has been happily married for many years to Honor,[2] a onetime poet. Although the couple are well off, and have only a single child, Honor gave up her writing career to devote herself to being a wife and mother, something she has never regretted. The play begins with Gus being interviewed for a bio piece by a haughty young feminist named

[2] Although the title of the play has the "u," the character's name, as spelled in the program, does not. Perhaps this distinction means something in Australia, Murray-Smith's home.

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Claudia, who goes on to interview Honor as well. Predictably, Claudia chides the older woman mercilessly for having devoted herself to her family rather than to self-advancement, but Honor defends herself sensibly.

Out of the blue, Gus announces that he is leaving Honor, having fallen in love with Claudia. There is a series of short discussion scenes with every possible pairing of the four characters (husband, wife, daughter, mistress), who seem obsessed with analyzing themselves. Claudia starts to get misgivings, seeing Honor and Gus as parent figures, and realizing that she was more flattered by Gus's attention than drawn by genuine love. Gus goes back to Honor, but it is clear that their once perfect marriage is dead. Gus breaks down and weeps. The audience was about 80 percent female the afternoon I saw the play, and no doubt every woman who had ever been dumped by a man could vent her resentment at that moment, but from my male point of view I could only wonder why anyone would ever leave someone as attractive as Jane Alexander for such a pompous ass. I could buy Gus having an affair with Claudia—Laura Linney, who played her, is a conventionally pretty blonde—but not his falling madly in love. Jane Alexander was betrayed by Congress when she was head of the N.E.A., and betrayed in her title character here, but most of all she was betrayed by trite playwriting.

We do not ordinarily think of Arthur Miller as a poetic dramatist, but no American playwright is quoted more often. *Death of a Salesman* alone gives us memorable phrases like "A man is not a piece of fruit," "He's liked but he's not—well liked," and, of course, "Attention must be paid." Similarly, Miller's drama is usually pigeonholed as social realism, but even *Salesman* has many surrealist scenes depicting Willy Loman's memories and fantasies; the original title of the play was *The Inside of His Head. A Memory of Two Mondays*, *After the Fall*, *Danger: Memory!*, and *The American Clock* are also memory plays that often mix objective and subjective elements.

Miller's latest play, *Mr. Peters' Connections*, is purely surrealist, depicting the dreams of an old man named Mr. Peters as he is napping, and perhaps dying. It is set in a big, dingy, deserted nightclub reminiscent of the forties. The manager or owner is apparently trying to sell it to Mr. Peters, but there are constant interruptions and digressions. Characters wander in and out, some alive, like Mr. Peters' energetic wife; some dead, like his brother; and some just mysterious, like a young woman who glides in wearing nothing but a transparent gown. The dialog is just as disjointed as the action—Mr. Peters even complains about the constant changing of subject—but demonstrates Miller's usual articulateness: "Have I, without knowing it, been embalmed?" asks Mr. Peters. Later, he complains, "I've arrived at the age when there's more suspense in a bowel movement than a presidential election."

For a fantasy play to work dramatically, however, there has to be a good story underneath it. The story does not have to be spelled out in

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all its details—indeed, it is best when just enough is told to leave the audience guessing—but it must have crises to engage us. *Salesman, After the Fall* (based on Miller's disastrous marriage to Marilyn Monroe), and *The American Clock* all have terrific stories in which families fall apart because of personal or social disasters, or both. *Mr. Peters' Connections* fails because, ironically, the title character has had a happy life. The nude woman reappears near the end wearing a dog collar and chain, a metaphor for her relationship with an abusive husband; apparently she represents an old, married girlfriend of Mr. Peters. Since he finds this degraded image horrifying, their relationship was no doubt traumatic, but it has had no lasting consequences, since he is now shown to have a discerning, sensible, active wife (probably based on photographer Inge Morath, to whom Miller has been married for some thirty-five years). A pregnant daughter appears at the end of the play, who tells him, "I love you Papa," to which he naturally responds warmly, but she has not been seen nor even mentioned before, nor is there a suggestion here of some previous estrangement, so that the moment does little for us. All happy families are the same, as Tolstoy said, and hence are uninteresting. I would rather be Mr. Peters' child than Willy Loman's, but I would rather see Loman's family onstage.

The Signature Theatre Company produced *Mr. Peters' Connections* as the culmination of a season dedicated to Miller's plays, under the company's admirable, long-standing policy of having distinguished playwrights in residence. They now have a pleasant new theatre near the western end of Forty-Second Street, signifying a shift to off-Broadway status from off-off. Garry Hynes, director of *Beauty Queen*, again provided understated but compelling staging. Francis O'Connor designed a wonderfully atmospheric setting for the play; with its dilapidated red banquette seats, red and white linoleum tile floor, and an old upright piano at the side, it announced its period and history before a word of dialog was spoken. Splendid lighting by Beverly Emmons and costumes by Teresa Snider-Stein enhanced the dream-like mood, but could not overpower the superior acting of Peter Falk in the title role, and Anne Jackson as his wife. There is an old theatrical saying that "acting is reacting," which Falk proved in every episode of "Columbo," and even more here; his bemused attitude at the bizarre world he had suddenly fallen into gave the play its potency and charm. Anne Jackson, intelligent and vivacious here, has long been married to the actor Eli Wallach, who was simultaneously starring in another off-Broadway play. Wallach and Miller are both eighty-two. Attention must be paid.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Sex Survey

ONE OF THE THINGS I LIKED BEST about "Taboo: Repression and Revolt in Modern Art," the spring exhibition at the Galerie St. Etienne, was the survey. Visitors so inclined were asked to fill out a questionnaire, naming the three works in the show they found most shocking with a few sentences about why those particular paintings, drawings, or photographs by Klimt, Grosz, Picasso, Mapplethorpe, or other contemporary artists were unsettling or offensive to them. I have no doubt that Andres Serrano will be the hands-down winner for the #1 slot, but I am curious to know who else proved worthy of mention. If you were willing to leave your name and address, a copy of the tabulations and a sampling of the visitors' observations will eventually be mailed to you. As one of those people who never decline a survey and respond at greater length than anyone wants, I eagerly await the results.

Does this sound a tad gimmicky? At a new gallery in SoHo or Chelsea, it probably would be—or perhaps, in truth, we would never be polled in that trendier setting on the very SoHo-ish, Chelsea-esque assumption that only a Philistine would find anything in an art context shocking or disreputable. Yet at the Galerie St. Etienne on West 57th Street (a veritable study center for twentieth-century German art), the atmosphere was serious, even earnest; the anonymous catalogue essay, brief and sensible; and the exploration of an important aspect of artistic experience in our time, admirably thorough. And while not every artist was represented by the best examples of the premise, such as we would expect from a museum exhibition, the range—from Max Beckmann and Alfred Kubin to Andy Warhol, Eric Fischl, Hannah Wilke, and Cindy Sherman—was just right for the show's intentions. Those intentions involved a consideration of the values of both audience *and* artist. "Bourgeoisphobia," as historian Peter Gay termed the phenomenon, was rife among late nineteenth-century artists, including (or particularly) some who were very comfortably bourgeois themselves. This calculated oppositional stance led to as much posturing as to legitimate attacks on a repressive social order—and how true that is in the 1990s, we are all well aware. "In a sense, the art world's persistent attraction to taboos," the essay noted, can be seen as "an acting out of . . . a century-long bad-boy act in which artists shock without directly threatening the status quo, and are then ultimately forgiven and rewarded." By bringing together potentially disturbing artworks by revered modern masters and less approved living artists, the Galerie St. Etienne asked its visitors to evaluate the posturing, sincerity, and skill of some thirty

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artists—to separate, by their own lights, those engaged in a "bad-boy act" from the real thing.

One difficulty, as the essay also bluntly admitted, is that "controversial though much of this art has been, our society today is so saturated by sex that it is hard to understand how these images can retain any power to offend." Yet this is a sentence that is less declarative than it sounds. The sheer variety of the work on view at the Galerie St. Etienne suggested more honest probing than doctrinaire certainty: Do artworks involving nudity, sex acts, sexual violence, or "transgressive" practices truly disturb anyone, and to what degree? How much of this is a matter of "pretend shock" or a form of preaching to the converted? Is there, anywhere, a "genuine subversive content" in art that might change or open minds? Or has the adversarial relationship between modern art and middle-class society "yielded a stalemate"? Good questions, and not ones that are easily answered or even asked by many artists, dealers, or curators.

Five nudes by Egon Schiele at the entrance of the gallery got the inquiry off to the right start. As last year's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art made clear, Schiele is someone who can still cause a stir. Yet he also represents, for this viewer, the paradigm of the artist who was once a taboo-breaker but no longer fulfills that function—a statement that does not minimize his stature one bit. *Seated Woman with Raised Skirt* (1910) and the black crayon drawings of nude girls are, to late twentieth-century eyes, too firmly part of a line that extends to *Lolita* and any number of current novels and films. Schiele's obsessions, which society insisted were his own (resulting in a jail sentence—so much for the rewards of shock value in Austria circa 1912), are now revealed to be ours, and the weird artistry of the images has long since been accepted *as artistry*. The latter point was a subtext in my reading of "Taboo: Repression and Revolt in Modern Art." Representations of nudity, brutality, or intercourse can hardly be taken as usefully violating a norm today, in and of itself, when the manner of expression—the art—is clearly of equivalent or greater importance to the maker and the viewer. Hence, the aesthetic is at war with the desire to revolt (in either sense of the word). The flair in Alfred Kubin's etchings, Max Pechstein's woodcuts, or Sue Coe's more contemporary rape pictures mark them as artworks first and foremost, and whatever the creator's intention that reality diminishes their blunt social commentary. You aren't really thinking about rape when you are also thinking about color, composition, and draftsmanship.

Picasso, three of whose etchings were in the show, is another matter. In fact, two of these works (the 1936 *Satyr Unveiling a Nude Woman* and one untitled work in the same spirit from 1971) made my list of three offensive images. From the first time I saw this vein of Picasso's canon twenty years ago, I have always felt manipulated, have always felt that the point was to force the viewer to collude in an offensive display of domination, an "unveiling" that is a form of rape in the guise of mythology and respect for genius. There is a lasciviousness in these pictures that isn't secondary to the drawing and isn't transgressive but

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reinforces time-honored rights of power—an affront to my sense of art and morality, rather than a purposeful rebellion against good taste. Why I do not believe that the same exploitation is taking place with Schiele's exposed girls and women is neither fully clear to me, nor would I be able to explain it briefly. But I feel the difference. (The complexities involved in aestheticizing blunt sexual moments were also to be seen with particular clarity at this year's Pierre Bonnard retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. The disrobing women, raped nymph, postcoital couple, and legs-open, crotch-exposed female nude in bed in the first gallery of that exhibition—unlike the artist's later, more ethereal bathing nudes—push right to the edge of taboo and repression and could be variously interpreted.)

Many of the works in this show were not likely to rile large numbers of sophisticated viewers, either because they were too programmatic, artistically naive, or insufficiently shocking compared to other works by the same artist that might have been included. Dotty Attie's nine small oil-on-canvas panels, a deconstruction of Courbet's nudes, are more plausible than earth-shattering, and David Wojnarowicz's composite photograph *House and Tornado* from his controversial *Sex Series* (1988–1989) is almost polite (never mind the two men engaging in oral sex in the corner) given his total output. Yet Hannah Wilke's 1981 photographs of herself nude next to her aging mother, bare-breasted after her mastectomy, surely made someone's list in the survey. Seeing these pictures next to Andres Serrano's 1996 *A History of Sex (The Kiss)*, in which a kneeling, elderly woman is photographed as she is about to kiss the penis of a standing young man whom we do not see from above the waist, actually clarified a great deal for me. Serrano's *Piss Christ* of NEA fame had much to recommend it on all levels, while his *History of Sex*—the whole lurid series was on view at Paula Cooper's gallery last year—was about someone who isn't very interested in photography *as photography* anymore. A color catalogue of naughties in sharp focus blown up to forty inches by thirty inches is not an exploration of the forbidden in the tradition of Schiele, Grosz, Lucien Freud, or even Eric Fischl. Serrano has broken a taboo in his intergenerational coupling and could be said to have done nothing more outrageous than Mapplethorpe did in training his camera, and us, on our culture's phallocentrism, as the gender theorists call it. But in showing the face of the old woman and not that of the young man, he has placed her in a very different position from that of Wilke's bold, authentic mother-as-cancer-survivor. Here we had the "bad-boy act" writ large by way of an image purporting to celebrate ageless desire but actually replicating the stale, sexist patterns of porn. Again, I appreciated the setup at the Galerie St. Etienne: an invitation to compare, contrast, and muse on our own, with no hint of curatorial judgements from on high.

Neither Chaim Soutine (1893–1943) nor Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) is a household name to the average museumgoer—nor, in the case of Hammershøi, even to most art history students. Two New

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York City exhibitions attempted to rectify that situation in 1998. "An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine" originated at the Jewish Museum and will travel over the next year to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Cincinnati Art Museum. "Vilhelm Hammershøi: Danish Painter of Solitude and Light," organized by the Ordrupgaard in Copenhagen and the Musée d'Orsay, made its only U.S. stop at the Guggenheim Museum.

Born near Minsk in Czarist Russia to an Orthodox family who opposed his ambitions, a friend of Amedeo Modigliani and Elie Faure, Soutine is an artist most of us know piecemeal and, vaguely, by his associations. He was part of the Jewish Museum's stirring 1985 exhibition, "Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris, 1905–1945," but is often relegated to upper second-string status in chronicles of the School of Paris. A visit to Buffalo always allows for a few moments arrested in front of the saturating reds of *Page Boy at Maxim's* (1927) at the Albright-Knox, the Phillips Collection keeps the gorgeous *Return from School After the Storm* (1939) on display, and in recent years *Madeleine Castaing* (1929) and *Chartres Cathedral* (1933) have been staples of the permanent collection galleries at the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, respectively. Yet except for trips to Merion, Pennsylvania to see the sizeable holdings of the Albert Barnes Collection (how prescient that terrible man was becomes clearer all the time), art lovers in the United States have been hard put to come by a sustained examination of one of the century's purest Expressionists.

I say "purest" because much of the appeal of Expressionism goes beyond the painterly, encompassing literary and historical concerns. We think of Munch as a darker Ibsen, a visual equivalent of Strindberg. We admire Kirchner and Beckmann not solely because of their vast skill at manipulating paint, but because of our interest in Weimar turbulence, a classier form of *Cabaret* nostalgia. Kokoschka pleases as part of the whole fin-de-siècle "scene," and Nolde is intriguing for his role in the modern European dalliance with "primitive" motifs. But, in the end, Soutine doesn't give us any of those handles to latch on to; his paintings aren't about his *shtetl* roots (à la Chagall), Montparnasse, his adopted homeland, or any of the impending wars he lived through. Certainly large themes can be read into his body of work—and the catalogue essays assembled by curators Norman Kleeblatt and Kenneth Silver allude to ideas about the assertion of Jewish identity, a tragic vision of decay, and a search for spirituality in the most extravagant physical experience ("the joy of sacred appetites")—but the paintings themselves are too disparate, and sometimes too mundane in content, for any intellectual information or cultural background to overshadow the naked force of the brushwork. It is a "pure" Expressionism that applies the same energy to the slats of a shutter as to the tawny fur of the hanging animal in *Hare Against Green Shutter* (1925). It is a "pure" Expressionism that leaves us with no curiosity about the artist's sitters or the actual sites of his landscapes, so intense are the bright colors Soutine works with, so thick the pigment, so tactile and complex the lines and

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jabs of paint. Carcasses of beef, rayfish, herrings, and peppers matter as much as his pastry chefs, choirboys, or country houses. In this sense, the retrospective—fifty-six paintings in all—was reasonably comprehensive. From the noble self-portrait of 1918 to the kitsch of *Tree at Vence* (1929) to the many fine landscapes of the "Ceret period," as it is known, we saw an artist who believed in the expressive power of his medium, pure and simple. These are artworks that don't whisper to us, "Paris in the twenties" or "Munich before the fall." They cry out, "Everything for art!" and bespeak restlessness unending.

Yet the viewing itself at the Jewish Museum was complicated by an unusual, somewhat tricky approach. Rather than grouping the paintings thematically (out of the question with Soutine) or chronologically (the usual method), Kleeblatt and Silver elected to divide them in a manner that acknowledged Soutine's place as a painter "firmly ensconced in the hierarchy of twentieth-century art, but tangential to a canonical modernist reading." Their solution to the question "Where do we place Soutine?" was an arrangement of the pictures by way of the three different readings Soutine was subject to during and even after his lifetime. The initial reception Soutine's art met with had to do, not surprisingly, with his perceived naiveté. He was the quintessential maker of "outsider art," a spontaneous, raw, untutored genius from the Slavic East. To the critics and connoisseurs of the late 1920s, he became an exciting if indecorous find—all that sloppy paint, all that muscular energy, a breath of fresh, if exotic, air. Who evinced less interest in the "new classicism" then sweeping the postwar art world? The paintings in the first gallery beyond the foyer that made this perspective plausible included the Detroit Institute's *Red Gladiolas* (1919), *Village Idiot* (1919), and several of his stunning portraits of old men who practically dissolve into the lush paint of their animated backgrounds.

The critical and curatorial response to Soutine in the thirties did an aboutface. His self-education at the Louvre became more apparent; the rayfish, hares, and other animals strung up by their legs or tails suddenly, rightly, brought to mind similar earthy still-life motifs in Chardin and Rembrandt. Other paintings directly alluded to works by Courbet (i.e., the 1934 *Siesta*—for this viewer, the one excruciatingly bad painting in the show) or a tradition of portraiture dating back to the Impressionists. *Still Life with Skate* (1924) and *Woman in Profile* (1937) fill the bill here as evidence of Soutine as the last best hope for a French Expressionism, more slyly knowing than naive. Lastly, there is the Soutine of the forties and fifties who meant so much to American artists like John Graham, Jack Tworkov, and Willem de Kooning: the precursor of Abstract Expressionism. For that matter, as early as 1936, American art critic Henry McBride had wisely noted that "Soutine's distortion is [merely] another way of being abstract." The carcasses of beef in all their splayed, gory majesty and the frenzied landscapes such as *Group of Trees* (1922) or *Gorge du Loup* (1920), in which only a few recognizable elements of landscape remain, filled the last two rooms, verifying

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McBride's comment and illustrating the plausibility of a link to the later Action Painting crowd.

Now for the *buts* and *howevers*. Much as I like the idea of a new "take" on any artist (and this was a clever one) and satisfactorily as this approach answered the original question "Where should we place Soutine?," there were problems. To begin with, the question itself is one that can only matter to scholars and students. To the general public for whom the exhibition is a first in-depth exposure to the artist, his fluctuating place in the canon is too pedantic a matter. Outside of a journal of critical theory, an essay about Saul Bellow, for instance, would focus on his novels themselves, their evolution, how we might interpret them, why we might prize or reject them. A text dealing with his shifting relation to the literary establishment, the publishing world, and the new postmodernist critics would be a different kettle of fish entirely. I am afraid we were set up at the Jewish Museum to learn more about art history and changing critical tastes than we were about Soutine himself. That also meant, of course, that a reading of the 200-page catalogue was essential in order to make sense of the premise—and that's never good news to those of us who believe in reading as little of any catalogue as possible until well after the show is over.

Finally, even in purely visual terms, the tripartite breakdown of the paintings didn't work, or not tightly enough. Why are those hanging sides of beef in the pre-abstraction rooms—where, as they truly are "blasts of paint," their placement does make sense—not also in the motifs-from-the-canon middle room, when they also clearly remind us of Rembrandt's work in that vein? The paint-splattered old men and some of the more raucous landscapes in the first, Soutine-as-*naif* room would similarly work just as well in the later, burgeoning abstraction gallery. In other words, the divisions have meaning only in very limited ways. From the perspective that matters to us, ours in the 1990s, two-thirds of Soutine's paintings would fit simultaneously in more than one "category." The arrangement of the fifty-six paintings, then, could only leave us reeling—grateful that the museum has brought them together in its elegant refurbished Beaux Arts building, but uncertain of what we will take with us from this fits-and-starts tour of past perceptions.

No such ambiguities troubled the first American retrospective of Vilhelm Hammershøi's paintings. The few dull, somber landscapes and the several competent realist nudes in the Guggenheim show might have been there to provide a respite from the demands of the main experience or to be faithful to the artist's oeuvre, to give a serious overview of Hammershøi's career, but the true claim on our attention—the reason for this exhibition—was clear, provocative, and undiluted. No one has painted interiors quite like those of this enigmatic turn-of-the-century Danish artist, and it is high time he was better known on this side of the Atlantic. In fact, though this was surely not the intention of the curators, the display of a few of Hammershøi's meticulously rendered large public exterior spaces—*View of Amalienborg Square* (1896) or *View of Christiansborg Palace* (1890)—served the purpose of sending me

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back again and again to the smaller, narrower spaces that obviously obsessed him and can easily obsess a modern viewer in the same way that the interiors of the Dutch masters do. If for nothing else than his rigor, Hammershøi ought to capture a wide following in this revisionist exercise. These are living quarters in which human interaction, anecdote, psychology, bright color, untidiness, noise, outside air—what we think of as living itself—has finally been expunged. Yet the surprise is: how much that turns out to leave us.

Hammershøi's remarkable talent for spareness was evident at an early age. *Young Girl Sewing* carries a date of 1887, meaning that the painter was twenty-three when he completed this picture, one of the finest tonal works of the era. Think of the middle-class women stitching away in so many American and British paintings of the 1880s, weighted down by Eastman Johnson-style detail, suffocating amid the horsehair sofas and gimcrackery. Then consider the accomplishment of a young man devoted to Whistler, intent on restricting himself, with deft, fluid brushstrokes, to gray (the sitter's skirt), black (her blouse), black-brown (her hair), silver (the blurred background), pale flesh and white cloth, doing away with the room she sits in entirely. And this, mind you, is Hammershøi's busiest image. He was never seduced by narrative or a wish to provide the viewer with any but the most austere pleasures. An old woman looks out of her window in the two versions of *Interior of Courtyard* (1899), but what she is gazing at we will never know, and *Sunbeams* (1900) provides the one and only glimpse of shafts of warming light. For the rest, it is the inside of Hammershøi's apartment with, at most, a single occupant in the room, often no one at all. Tables are tidied (but in readiness for what?). Wine bottles have been placed, cabinets cleared, piano music set out (but for whom?). These are homes as sets, with the same allure that empty stages have for the theater-struck. Presumably that means we live in roles, playing parts assigned or chosen, and I suppose there is something Edward Hopper-esque about that notion, but the few people who do appear in these paintings wander about more in the nature of stagehands contemplating the furnishings along with us, more taken with the props than the actors or the script. The painting over the sofa in *French Empire Sofa* (1904) might be the "blank" picture bought by Victor Garber in *Art* for all we can tell; if you are looking for a clue to an Ingmar Bergman drama of hidden angst, Hammershøi deviously cuts you off at every turn. But he will make you stare at that sofa, wall, and door frame and the subtlest flecks of gray, silver, dark green, and brown as if you were nailed to your seat at *Cries and Whispers*.

In a sense, Vilhelm Hammershøi was as much an odd-man-out as Chaim Soutine. How is one to "place" him in relation to Munch, Ensor, Mondrian, the Post-Impressionists? But that is just the beauty of this century's-end moment we are living through, as we question past hierarchies and ask ourselves anew what it is we find significant—shocking, intense, or spiritually compelling—in the visual bounty of the last hundred years.

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BERT CARDULLO

High Infidelity

IN THE WAKE OF *TITANIC*, two cinematic lifeboats managed to float my way from Europe: *Prisoner of the Mountains*, by the Russian director Sergei Bodrov, and *La Promesse*, by the Belgian brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. Each of these films is about cultural clash and the moral enlightenment as well as emotional awakening that, under the right circumstances, can come of it. Ironically, the "right circumstances," in both instances, are those of war and captivity, literal in the case of the Russian picture, figurative in the case of the Belgian one. This is not exactly a new subject—the attempt to reveal a human bond between characters who are otherwise enemies or opposites—but it need *not* be one in the hands of a sensitive writer-director, like Bodrov or the Dardenne team.

Indeed, in the Russian's case, he is a better *auteur* than the original author of the story on which *Prisoner of the Mountains* is based: Tolstoy, the action of whose "Prisoner of the Caucasus" (1870) Bodrov has transposed from the Chechnya of 150 years ago to the same general area today. In this area the Russian army is simultaneously governing and fighting the Muslim population—prior, of course, to that army's withdrawal in August 1996 as the result of a treaty signed between Chechnyan rebels and the Russian government. The real-life Russian encounter with the Muslim world over the past twenty years, let alone over the last century-and-a-half, has often been characterized by such violence rather than by attempts at understanding: in addition to the Chechnyan struggle, for example, there was the Afghan war of the 1980s.

Many of the Muslim rebels in *Prisoner of the Mountains* are played by local people from whom the fifty-year-old Bodrov has coaxed natural, unforced performances, even as he did from professionals and amateurs alike in at least three of his seven previous features. But the difference in Bodrov's use of non-professionals here is signal, for their rough-hewn, red-cheeked faces make up a kind of human scenery that underscores this picture with history—with the history of similar faces that populated the isolated, stubborn, struggling region of Chechnya before the czars as well as throughout their reign, and that have since survived the seventy-odd years of the so-called New Order. The people remain, and their village in *Prisoner of the Mountains* remains much as it was when Tolstoy was a soldier there: a place of flinty, unpaved roads and clay huts with earthen floors, where wheat is still threshed by mules, men still travel on horseback, and dress codes, gender roles, the veneration of

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ancestors, and the rule of elders have persevered, unchanged, for long generations. These Chechnyans may not be prisoner to the Caucasus Mountains, like their Russian captives, but they are in awe of the cruelly beautiful, grandly gaunt peaks that look down at them in stunning images (photographed by Pavel Lebeshev) with a chilling hint of blue-green.

So much so that the Chechnyans have composed a plaintive yet celebratory ode to the Caucasus which forms half of the movie's score. The second half of the musical soundtrack counterpoints the first: beloved songs from past Russian military campaigns that are here ironically deployed. There is no such irony in the story "A Prisoner of the Caucasus"; nor is the short story's portrayal of Russians and Caucasians as balanced, as mutually compassionate, as the motion picture's. Tolstoy's central concern was with the experience of one of his two Russian soldiers, the dashing, courageous officer Vania Zhílin, captured along with another officer, the stout and dullish Sasha Kostílin, in an ambush by raiding "Tartar" mountaineers. "A Prisoner of the Caucasus" is related in the third person, from Vania's point of view, which means that we get his interpretation of people and events with virtually no narrative intervention from the inveterately economical Tolstoy.

Bodrov's cinematic adaptation does not employ such third-person narration on the soundtrack. *Prisoner of the Mountains* instead slips naturally into the omniscient form endemic to the camera-eye, and it is this omniscience—this power to regard character and action from an all-encompassing perspective—that enables Bodrov fully to articulate elements of the drama which Tolstoy only touches upon, sometimes with a touch of heaviness. To wit, the relationship between Vania and Sasha. The screenplay demotes Vania from a bold, debonair officer to a newly conscripted private, naïve and reticent, while it changes his fellow captive from a plodding, overweight officer to a veteran, non-commissioned one, a sergeant who is at once clever, cynical, garrulous, and reckless/ruthless.

Several objectives are thereby achieved: (1) greater contrast between two already different prisoners; (2) more balance in their relationship, since the movie, unlike the story, depicts an enterprising Sasha as the initiator of escape, not a resourceful Vania, while the latter remains the one, in film as in fiction, who develops an affection for Dína, the girl who brings the Russians their daily rations; (3) greater dramatic tension in the story as a whole, since the boyish Vania's affection for his "enemy," the thirteen-year-old Dína, dangerously if plausibly verges on love-cum-marriage in Bodrov's adaptation; and (4) less contrast or difference between the Russian prisoners and their Chechnyan captors, because the former are no longer members of an elite class of commissioned officers, while their chief jailer—the fiftyish Abdul-Murat, Dína's father—is clearly the village patriarch.

The similarities between these rivals extend to parallelisms in the plot and beyond, for, in *Prisoner of the Mountains*, the stern and proud

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Abdul-Murat doesn't kill his two Russian prisoners after the guerrilla ambush because he hopes to exchange them for his schoolteacher-son, Dzaramat, a prisoner of the *Russians* whom he has not been able to ransom with money. In Tolstoy's story, Abdul-Murat is less sympathetic, for he has no son and is interested only in ransoming Vania and Sasha for monetary gain. And in "Prisoner of the Caucasus" there is no character called Hasan, a dumb man whom Bodrov and his collaborators write into the script as a guard for the already shackled Russians. His real significance, however, lies in the genesis of his dumbness: he lost the power of speech as a prisoner of war in Siberia, where his Russian captors cut out his tongue.

The Chechnyan captors of Vania and Sasha don't cut out their tongues; indeed, they could be said to give the Russians a voice in their own fates. After a failed attempt to exchange the two soldiers for Dzaramat—failed because Russian forces tried to trick Abdul-Murat—the patriarch ignores pressure from his fellow villagers to butcher the Russians, and instead makes his prisoners write letters to their mothers urging them to intercede on their sons' behalf. Vania does so and his widowed schoolteacher-mother comes to his aid; Sasha writes home, too, but he knows his letter will never get a response, as he grew up in an orphanage. The letter-writing in the story, by contrast, is only an appeal for ransom money, and there the swaggering Vania deliberately misaddresses his letter so that it will not reach its destination, whereas the pathetic Sasha writes home a second time in a desperate attempt to raise the necessary rubles for release.

The commander of the Russian garrison in the nearby, occupied town where Dzaramat is being held in the movie meets with Vania's mother, but only to advise her not to negotiate with the shifty locals; then immediately afterwards Sasha and Vania escape. In the process the expeditious Sasha kills both Hasan and a shepherd, while the bumbling Vania fires a stolen gun by accident, thereby giving away their position to the pursuing Chechnyan rebels. Both Russians are recaptured, yet only Private Zhílin is returned to his Muslim master: Sergeant Kostílin summarily gets his throat cut for his murder of the herdsman. Nonetheless, Sasha does not disappear completely from the film. Through shared adversity the bond of trust between him and the otherwise earnest Vania has grown so great, despite the sergeant's at first utter contempt for his subordinate, that Vania twice has visions in which a serene and solicitous Sasha appears. As for Abdul-Murat's son, he too is killed shortly after Sasha in an escape attempt—this one tellingly prompted by the shooting of a Chechnyan collaborator by his own father, who especially buys a Russian pistol from a pawnshop in order to do the job.

Because of Dzaramat's death, Dína reports to Vania in the solitary confinement of a stinking pit, he will be executed the next day. She then betrays her father—or, depending on your point of view, honors her burgeoning affection for Vania—by giving the Russian the key to his shackles. In order to protect Dína, however, he refuses to run away in

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Bodrov's adaptation, and is subsequently taken into the mountains to be shot by Abdul-Murat. But this father can't shoot a stricken mother's only son, or his beloved daughter's own love, so he fires into the air, then turns around and starts walking home. As a stunned Vania wanders away on the vast Caucasian slopes, four Russian helicopters appear overhead; they are on their way to a retaliatory strike against Abdul-Murat's village, though, not to a merciful rescue of the lone Private Zhílin. While martial music blares on the soundtrack, the in some ways still innocent Vania fondly recollects, in voice-over, his experiences as a "guest" of the Chechnyan people. For many of their customs he developed an increasing respect, he says, even as they did for his "alien" skills as a mender of watches and a crafter of bric-a-brac.

Tolstoy called his "Prisoner of the Caucasus" a "Tale for Children," and in its uncomplicated view of the world, the story certainly seems designed to appeal to the child in all of us—particularly as its ending differs from the resoundingly poignant one of the film version. In the story, Sasha is not slain after he and Vania are recaptured, because the former didn't kill an innocent shepherd. Afraid that her father will give in to his compatriots' demands that he cut Vania's throat, Dína frees him from his outdoor dungeon, while Sasha remains shackled in the pit on account of illness and fatigue. Then Vania does indeed run away, arriving back at his Russian fort after an all-night journey. "He went on serving in the Caucasus," Tolstoy flatly concludes, and "a month later Kostílin was released after paying five thousand rubles ransom." As for Vania's last-minute promise to Dína that he would never forget her, no further mention is made of it or of the girl.

Since the Dína-Vania relationship provides the gist of Bodrov's narrative, if not Tolstoy's, it was imperative that both roles be well-cast. Bodrov found Susanna Mekhralieva in a school in Dagestan, not far from Chechnya, and her performance as Dína is exemplary in its ease, simplicity, and understatement. The director found Sergei Bodrov, Jr., in his own family, and, as Vania, the son gives an equally unsentimentalized but tremendously affecting début performance of great faith—youthful faith in a caring universe. The seasoned Oleg Menshikov, for his part, brings to the role of Sasha the doomed raillery of a man convinced at once of his own superiority and his common mortality: a combination Errol Flynn and Martin Sheen, as it were.

Prisoner of the Mountains was beaten out for the 1997 Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film by the Czech director Jan Sverák's insipid *Kolya,* but this shouldn't surprise anyone, given the Academy's predilection for the maudlin and mannered over the measured yet moving, whatever a motion picture's national origin may be. In the case of the equally measured yet moving *La Promesse,* the national origin is Belgian (as opposed to French), which certainly hasn't helped its distribution prospects. *La Promesse* was made by two brothers in their forties, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, who have spent most of their twenty-year filmmaking career collaborating on documentaries for European television.

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With this, their third fiction feature, they join the front rank of contemporary directors working in the tradition of social realism, from Ken Loach in England to Gianni Amelio in Italy to Viacheslav Krishtofovich in Russia.

La Promesse takes place in Seraing, a suburb of the heavily industrialized city of Liège, Belgium. Seraing is populated largely by Liège's work force, or former work force, since unemployment is high here as in other industrial cities of Europe. It is all the more high because, among the people who continue to work, there are illegal aliens, either smuggled into Belgium without the necessary papers or, if they once had legal documentation, these immigrants have overstayed their permits. Thus they are easy prey for native Belgians who employ such laborers at the same time that they ruthlessly exploit them. And Roger is one of those natives, a jowly, thickly bespectacled working-class man who owns and runs an old building in Seraing split up into small, dingy apartments, where immigrants live at high rents and work at odd jobs for their no-nonsense landlord. Soon these poor people discover that, in addition to their rent, their groceries and heating are deducted from the already low salaries Roger pays them. They are his financial prisoners, in other words, with nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to.

La Promesse is not primarily a socioeconomic report, however. Yes, the film casts a critical eye on the European underclass's escalating hostility toward immigrants, especially Africans, in what has become a Darwinian struggle for survival between both groups. But this picture's aim is less to expose racist xenophobia in Belgium than to create a moral drama out of that xenophobia's social and economic causes. In order to do so, the directors—authors of their own script, it's worth repeating—introduce someone who, like Dína in *Prisoner of the Mountains,* is doubtless his parent's child, yet who is less hardened by experience and therefore more reachable. This would be Igor, Roger's fifteen-year-old son: a blond, skinny, slightly long-haired protagonist. He is an apprentice mechanic who works at a gas station for a boss other than his father, but this is a job Igor quickly loses because of his obligation to assist Roger in various schemes. Assist the boy does, without a trace of ethical qualm, for his father is the source of his behavioral code and this man is a businesslike hustler, not an irresolutely evil or even consciously criminal taskmaster. Roger is matter-of-fact about what he does for a living, and his matter-of-factness has filtered down to his son, who unhesitatingly accepts his parent's amoral attitude as the way of the world.

The film begins with the thrum of machinery under the credits, a thrumming that we will continue to hear sporadically in place of a musical soundtrack. There is no sweet music in Roger and Igor's life, the Dardennes imply, only harsh noise and frenzied activity. And that activity is mirrored by Alain Marcoen and Benoît Dervaux's camera, which is frequently up close, sometimes handheld, and seemingly always in pursuit of the hurriedly driving Roger or the quickly moving Igor,

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with little time for establishing shots or panoramas of the colorless (yet colored) cityscape. Soon the force responsible for the apparently impassive Igor's moral edification and emotional rousing—a young African woman named Assita—arrives in Liège from Burkina Faso with her infant son. She has been smuggled there at a price to join her forty-two-year-old husband, Hamidou, who is already a resident in Roger's flophouse. Immediately Igor is fascinated by the tall, dignified, and self-assured Assista's "difference": by something as minor as the extreme whiteness of her teeth; and by something as major as Assita's observance of West African ritual—in her prescribed bathing of her child, for example, so as to protect him from evil spirits.

A short time after this woman's arrival, her husband is working from a scaffold on the building next door when government inspectors unexpectedly appear at the site. Roger sends Igor to warn Hamidou and the other immigrant laborers to hide, but in his hurry the African tumbles from the scaffold and is seriously injured. He thinks he's dying when Igor comes to his side, and for this reason Hamidou elicits a promise from the boy—the promise of the film's title—to look after Assita and his son. Igor drags the body out of sight, tries to halt the man's bleeding, then begs his father to take Hamidou to a hospital; but Roger refuses because of the legal trouble that would follow and imperil his business.

He takes away the tourniquet that his son had been applying, then forces the stunned boy to help him hide the African under some canvas and later to bury the corpse in cement. Roger argues to Igor that Hamidou's death was not their fault, but the teenager knows that the African need not have died; in effect, Roger killed him rather than face an official investigation of his illegal activities. From this point on in the picture, the conscience-stricken youth vacillates between loyalty to his father, who lovingly supports his son but is sometimes physically brutal toward him, and loyalty to his oath to Hamidou, whom he barely knew but whose grave, unruffled wife continues (unbeknownst to her) to exercise a hold over Igor.

For a while, the boy tries to salve his conscience by doing favors for Assita while keeping the truth from her about her husband: helping the woman to build a pen in an alley to hold a sheep that she will sacrifice to celebrate the end of Ramadan, for instance, but above all by paying off every bit of Hamidou's 10,000-franc gambling debt, which debt is the reason that her husband fled, Roger lies to Assita. The boy's father further fakes a telegram to the African woman from Hamidou, instructing her to join him in Cologne, whereas what the Belgian really intends to do is sell Assita into prostitution there.

Igor comes to Assita's aid again, however, telling her the truth about the telegram—but not yet about her husband—and fleeing with this grateful but puzzled woman in Roger's van. With Igor present, Assita then consults an African spiritualist about Hamidou's whereabouts, but he mistakenly sees no evidence of her husband's death in his collection

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of jujus and simultaneously advises his client to leave Belgium. (At least Assita's earlier splitting open of a live chicken to read its entrails had yielded the correct information that Hamidou was nearby and that she should therefore persist in her attempts to locate him.)

So Assita decides to go by train to Carrara, Italy, where she in any case has a relative, and to wait there for news of Hamidou, which Igor has promised to provide in addition to providing his African friend with forged papers for her trip together with a bundle of francs and lire. Igor's other promise, made to the dying Hamidou, keeps nagging at him, however, for he knows that he will not be able to take care of the African's wife and child once they are in Italy. When Roger finally finds this odd couple hiding out in a back room at the garage where Igor used to work, the son is forced to make a choice between the father who has encouraged him to lie and steal and the woman through whose clarity of vision he has first glimpsed virtue, as well as through whose genuine devotion to family he has first understood selflessness. Paradoxically, Igor chooses to be disloyal to *his* family because Roger feels no loyalty toward anyone outside his immediate circle of two.

To disable as well as punish his screaming, importunate father, the teenager uses a mechanical device that chains him upside down without his glasses from the ceiling of the garage, in a stark visual symbol of the blindness, wrong-headedness, and constriction of Roger's moral code. Then Igor, Assita, and her baby escape by foot, crossing a bridge on their way to the train station from which two bigots had earlier urinated down upon the distraught black mother with a feverish infant strapped to her back. Figuratively speaking, Igor cannot do the same to Assita, so he blurts out the truth about Hamidou—how and why he died, where he's buried—as they are walking up a stairway in the railway terminal. Fatherless child in tow, Assita just keeps on walking away down a long corridor, with Igor following but with the camera stationary, in a long take of a long shot: one of very few, if not the only one, in *La Promesse*, and therefore all the more effective in conveying its meaning that Roger and Igor's intense hustle has at last come to a halt. As the closing credits come up, we hear only the buzz of the train-station lobby until the screen goes to final black, in an unmusical coda designed to make us ponder what Assita and Igor will now do.

Why, suddenly, is Igor willing and able to make this shift and thereby keep his promise to Hamidou? There are several reasons: first, the shock of the African's violent death followed by Roger's shockingly business-like attitude toward covering it up; second, Igor's youth and relative inexperience, which, in this coming-of-age story, render the teenager susceptible to the outside influence of someone like Assita; and third, Assita herself, who touches this man-child through her startling sense of self-worth in a money-grubbing world that denies the value of people like her, that puts the overwhelming emphasis on things-for-themselves rather than on fellow-feeling. Moreover, Assita's reliance on magic and ritual, rather than seeming barbaric, makes her appear to Igor to be in

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touch with infinitely larger matters than the mere petty grubbing of himself and his father—makes her seem to believe in something, in other words, besides the frantic aggrandizement of oneself.

Lest the reader conclude that *La Promesse* is thus a simplistic critique, through Igor's benign contact with the Third World, of Western acquisitiveness, bear in mind that Hamidou himself was an obsessive gambler prior to his death whose fiscal irresponsibility imperiled his family's very survival; and that his fellow gamblers were also illegal immigrants—Eastern Europeans, Asians, other Africans—unwilling to forgive his large debt. The portrayal of these "guest workers," as Western Europeans euphemistically like to call them, is untainted by sorrowful sentimentality, then: they are tough and wily, knowing yet angry, in the face of Roger's outrageous exploitation of them and their families. Moreover, some of them will go so far as to sell their bodies in order to get ahead.

Not Assita, it's true, but she nonetheless remains unsentimentalized herself: she carries a knife, which she pulls on Igor when he reveals that Hamidou does not await her in Cologne, and she stones the Belgian teenager at one point to keep him away from her ailing child, whom she erroneously believes the White Man has infected. Igor grows fond of Assita despite her reserved air, her suspicion of his motives, and even her hostility toward him, but that fondness never grows into an interracial romance that would mawkishly obscure the complexity of the film's theme and of their own lives. Nor is Roger's relationship with his girlfriend, Marie, allowed to become anything more or less than what it is for this man of material appetite: a sexual affair of frank necessity, simple convenience, and easy pleasure.

The veteran Olivier Gourmet plays Roger more like a gourmand, devouring the role in its entirety rather than picking out the best bits for his and everyone else's delectation. That is, he has created a complete character whose believability hinges on the dispatch with which he conducts himself—a dispatch that implies previous deliberation and resolution, and that does not allow for selected, present-tense moments of soul-searching, on the one hand, and self-display or -dramatization, on the other. In his first role Jérémie Renier, as Igor, is Gourmet's son to the extent that he behaves with a similar heedless dispatch until his transformation, whose various stages Renier handles with empathic conviction and organic restraint. Igor's catalyst is played by Assita Ouédraogo, a schoolteacher in Burkina Faso. Though not related to the filmmaker Idrissa Ouédraogo, she has appeared in several of this masterful West African's motion pictures, which are noted for their use of non-professional actors. Simply endowing *La Promesse* with her beautiful presence, she cares for her son and is devoted to her husband as if they were still living in Burkina Faso, where the ritualistic order of things continues to include self-sacrifice as well as sacrifice of the animal variety.

The mix of professionals and non-professionals alike in *La Promesse*

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and *Prisoner of the Mountains* works, as the ingenuousness of one group gets played off against the ingenuity of the other in a revelatory way rarely exploited by the American cinema. Indeed, when I see far-reaching gems like *Prisoner of the Mountains* and *La Promesse*—the products of relatively modest national cinemas—I think precisely of our own immodest cinema and all the money it spends each year on domesticated duds (whether financially successful or not). Our cinema has always functioned in this way; that is why it properly calls itself "the industry"; and that is why most of its products are disposable or perishable, like *Titanic*.

This situation isn't going to change, but it's nice to be reminded yet again by Europe Eastern and Western of the large possibilities—some would say responsibilities—inherent in film art. Particularly of the low-budgeted, small-scale kind: out of the similar, seemingly meager plot ingredient of a motherless child thrown into contact with an alien soul, the Dardenne brothers and Sergei Bodrov have frugally fashioned unique cinematic works that speak not only to each other and to the respective cultures of Belgium and Burkina Faso, Russia and Chechnya. These pictures speak also to a world increasingly filled with single-parent families, economic refugees, political-cum-military prisoners—all of them in search of permanent (re)unification, final redemption, and lasting remembrance.

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THOMAS M. DISCH

Being One Being a Genius Sometimes

SHE HAS HAD TO WAIT A WHILE FOR IT, but patience was one of Gertrude Stein's strong points, and now she's got what she always insisted on—official recognition of her genius in a most authenticating form, two hefty volumes, the 99th and 100th, in The Library of America.[1] The two volumes encompass work from her early (but posthumously published) novel, *Q.E.D.*, to her insouciant one-page dismissal of atomic dread, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb," which begins, "They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it."

She explains with, for Stein, wondrous brevity: "Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. And really way down that is the way everybody feels about it. They think they are interested in it but they really are not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting."

Richard Howard, reviewing these volumes for the *New York Times*, deemed this piece, which may be her last written words, "grimly inadequate," but I find them a typically astringent sample of Stein in no-nonsense mode and even prophetic of what would become, at the height of the Cold War, the sanity-saving black humor of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. This is the Stein who made headlines by proclaiming her own genius and by following *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (published in 1933 and included in Vol. I) with the even greater presumption of *Everybody's Autobiography* (published in 1937, but not reprinted by LoA), in which Stein declares, "Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century and I have been the creative literary mind of the century." So, when she declares what "everybody" feels "really way down" about the atomic bomb, or anything else, she speaks with the doctrinaire self-confidence of a crank writing to the editor of

[1] GERTRUDE STEIN: (I) Writings 1903–1932; (II) Writings 1932–1946, ed. by *Catherine R. Stimpson* and *Harriet Chessman*. The Library of America. $40.00 each.

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the local paper concerning the Almighty's opinions on the issues of the day.

It is this vein of divine/infantine omniscience that modernism sought to tap in a variety of ways, many signposted by Everyone's unwittingly wise critique, "My five-year-old daughter could paint as good as that." The art of naifs like the Douanier Rousseau, of African primitives, and of kindergarten fingerpainters all underpins a theory of art that sees beauty in the uncorseted freedoms of the jungle and the nursery, where the wild things are. Paris in the spring of this century was the capital city of the newly liberated Unconscious, and Gertrude Stein was ideally situated to be its oracle, as a wild thing herself (an American), a collector of the most advanced art, and, in Marilyn Hacker's phrase, "another Jewish lesbian in France."

She had studied with William James at Harvard, where in 1896 she had co-written a paper on "Normal Motor Automatism" (for both its significance and rarity, I would have liked to see this in *Writings*), in which Stein offers a sample of her own automatic handwriting at age twenty-two ("When he could not be the longest and thus to be, and thus to be, the strongest")[2] marked by the asyntactic repetitions and jingling rhymes of her mature style.

Further, she had become, with her brother Leo, a discerning collector of Fauvist and Cubist artists—a collection that would have its own melodramatic part to play throughout her life and Alice Toklas'. Those paintings were her oriflamme or ignis fatuus, depending on how one assesses her final achievement. From them Stein drew the conclusion that if a painting need not represent the real objects of the world to be a thing of beauty, literature should be able to claim the same autonomy. As another, less radical poet has it, "A poem should not mean but be." Stein, taking MacLeish at his word, produced such *objets d'art* as "Shoes" from *Tender Buttons*, her landmark collection of nonrepresentational writing published in 1914:

> To be a wall with a damper a stream of pounding way and nearly enough choice makes a steady midnight. It is pus.
>
> A shallow hole rose on red, a shallow hole in and in this makes ale less. It shows shine.

Another sampling from *Tender Buttons*, "A table."

> A table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness. Is it likely that a change.
>
> A table means more than a glass even a looking glass is tall. A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little thing it

[2] James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company* (New York, 1974), p. 33.

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means it does mean that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake.

Those inclined to giggle at Picasso may declare that this is simply gibberish, but that is by no means the case. Stein's is a chiseled and considered gibberish that flirts with the possibilities of meaning but never yields. Every assertion stops short of even the simplest referential certainty. Is the glass in question *on* the table? Or is it much larger, a looking glass? The necessary places, are they *at* the table, where guests would sit? And if these little puzzlements and others only produce a shrug, how is it that the same ambiguous and nonrepresentational set of glass/table/stand seems entirely adequate subject matter in a painting by Juan Gris? Isn't the real interest in either a poem or a painting the thought-labyrinth to which the poet/painter serves as guide? That would seem to be the hope of the author of *Tender Buttons*. The question is still moot.

There is another esthetic dimension to Stein at her most rebarbative, a *z*-coordinate at right angles to both ordinate and abscissa, and that is her daily circumstances as an American in Paris. Living in French and thinking in English can induce strange resonances. One cannot escape the sense of the mystery of that part of the world one cannot name. Language easily dissociates itself from meaning and becomes a rhythmic sound, shimmering with odd, illogical juxtapositions. *Le crayon est sur le table,* to be sure, but it is actually a pencil. One's social inferiors—*la bonne à tout faire* herself—may have a more sure grasp of the verbal environs at the primary level of word-to-thing correspondence. This can be both infantilizing and strangely inspiring. Stein was no blustering monoglot but she would not often have been mistaken for a native Parisienne. The French (and English) spoken at her famous Saturday soirees was probably a close facsimile of the prose to be found in *Three Lives* and other early "portraits" in prose, an amalgam of repetitions and approximations and gauche simplifications that transfixes its listeners by virtue of the effort they must exert to extract any sense at all from the expatriate's well-meaning gabble. Here are the third and fourth paragraphs of her portrait of Matisse, written circa 1910:

> He certainly very clearly expressed something. Some said that he did not clearly express anything. Some were certain that he expressed something very clearly and some of such of them said that he would have been a greater one if he had not been one so clearly expressing what he was expressing. Some said he was not clearly expressing what he was expressing and some of such of them said that the greatness of struggling which was not clear expression made of him one being a completely great one.
>
> Some said of him that he was greatly expressing something struggling. Some said of him that he was not greatly expressing something struggling.

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Capable exegetes can extract plausible meanings from these monotonies, as does Herbert Leibowitz in his discussion of this portrait in his chapter on Stein in *Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography*: "Like an oracle's priest, Stein sits unseen behind the dense thickets of sentences rendering her capsule judgment: Matisse is 'certainly a great man,' but a subtle flaw taints his art. The sumptuous elegance, the Fauvist color, the pictorial rhythm of Matisse's canvases are too smooth, too transparent; 'clearly expressing something,' in Stein's view, limits one aesthetically. . . . 'Something being struggling,' a feature missing from Matisse's work, is what made her and Picasso's genius so special."

Even those who accept Leibowitz's paraphrase may wonder why Stein's rather plain meaning (as per Leibowitz) requires the clanking apparatus of her prose. Did the wheel really need to be re-invented when it was performing so serviceably on so many other vehicles? What other purpose *besides* conveying her sense do all those epicycles and involutions serve? Is it only that by aping the longueurs of a strict mathematical proof, as Heideggerish philosophers are wont to do, the author seeks to convey a similar Euclidean necessity? She did call her first novel *Q.E.D.*, after all, and her chosen co-regent of the twentieth century was Einstein.

What mainly accounts for the occluding elements in Stein's style was the fact that she had something to hide. Not her reservations about the greatness of Matisse, though a veil can be handy in those circumstances, too. Her guilty secret, like most everyone's, was sex. After the cautionary example set by Oscar Wilde, writers of the early 1900s were not about to advertise themselves as sodomites. There was, however, an increasing number of inverts (or whatever they were to call themselves) who wanted to enjoy the ordinary writerly freedom to write about themselves. But how was one to do that, and to live a social life, and entertain high ambitions without suffering such a fate as Wilde's? For a moneyed American the answer was to become an expatriate, freed from the necessity of explaining oneself to neighbors and co-workers, free to be openly butch or effeminate, and (in some few capital cities) a citizen of a homosexual frogpond large enough to provide a reasonable facsimile of the social world from which one was excluded. That citizenship might be revoked without notice, as it was for Wilde (who died in Paris in 1900) and would be for all German homosexuals, but for an American heiress Paris felt like freedom. Stein and Toklas had the courage to live *as if* that freedom were real, and by the thirties and forties they had become the most emblematic lesbian couple of their era.

One tacit clause in Stein's contract with fame was that she would eschew the erotic realism of those, like D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller, for whom "modernist" was an early synonym for X-rated. Her first novel, *Q.E.D.*, which depicts a lesbian love triangle, remained unpublished in her lifetime. Its inclusion in Vol. I is ungainsayable, given Stein's figurehead status as America's Number One Lesbian. But even those who worship at her shrine will wish it were a better book. It's not that it

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is odd, like *Three Lives*, or punishingly dull like *The Making of Americans*. It's just flat. Dramatize, dramatize, Henry James urged his disciples, and that is what all novice novelists suppose they are doing when they tell you *about* their story instead of letting events speak for themselves. Here is a specimen from three-fourths of the way through the 63-page tale:

> They were each too fond of the other ever to venture on an ultimatum for they realized that they would not be constant to it. The question of relative values and responsibilities was not again openly discussed between them. Subtly perhaps unconsciously but nevertheless persistently Helen now threw the burden of choice upon Adele. Just how it came about she never quite realized but inevitably now it was always Adele that had to begin and had to ask for the next meeting. Helen's attitude became that of one anxious to give all but unfortunately prevented by time and circumstances. Adele was sure that it was not that Helen had ceased to care but that intentionally or not she was nevertheless taking full advantage of the fact that Adele now cared equally as much.

If the twenty-nine-year-old Stein had been unwise enough to publish this when it was written, in 1903, I doubt it would have had either a popular or scandalous success like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* of 1928. What the book crucially lacks is any sense of its possible readership and the things *they* want to know about: the pain, the guilt, the fear, the anger, all the basic components of homosexuality experienced as a social reality and an ethical problem—such a novel as, in due course, hundreds of novelists would write with varying degrees of success.

Stein's greatness, like Helen Keller's, had its source precisely in her blindness. She wrote with the blithe, blissed-out solipsism of the infant Krishna, and, after a slow start, she wrote in spate for over three decades because she had the good fortune to find the one thing every would-be Godhead needs most, a source of constant attention, unqualified admiration, and boundless love. She had met Alice B. Toklas.

Toklas cannot be credited with all Stein's late-blooming achievement. Even before they met Stein had finished her first considerable work of fiction, the three novellas that make up *Three Lives*. In these Stein strikes a balance (unique in her fiction) between a distinctive, even eccentric prose style and conventional narrative interest. The title character of "The Good Anna" bears a close resemblance to the heroine of Flaubert's "Un Coeur Simple," a domestic servant of blinkered intelligence and perfect fidelity whose meager life is chronicled with little evident sympathy. The second story, "Melanctha," aspires to portray a black woman with the same naturalistic accuracy, but the texture is necessarily thinner, since Stein's experience of black life was limited to the short time she served as a medical caseworker in Baltimore. Yet Stein has begun to turn her abstract, summarizing style into an asset, creating a

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mannered English refracted by her years (and ears) of expatriatism. Here is a typical specimen, ripe with warts and little graces:

> James Herbert was a powerful, loose built, hard handed, black, angry negro. Herbert never was a joyous negro. Even when he drank with other men, and he did that very often, he was never really joyous. In the days when he had been most young and free and open, he had never had the wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow to negro sunshine.

One can see, in the brutal simplicities of that passage—the artless string of adjectives, the repetitions, the grave judgments so guilelessly rendered—the aspects of the Stein style that Hemingway would redeploy for his own use, as a corrective to the florid style of *fin de siècle* belletrists.

But plainness was not what Stein was after. *Gloire* was her destination—an astonishment of beauty, a joy like that of sex; or rather, like those elements of the arts, painting especially, that can best approximate such joy. She supposed, as have others from Rimbaud to Frank O'Hara, that one might simulate ecstasy by short-circuiting ordinary discursive sense, and like those others, she enjoyed only a hit-or-miss success. For every line like "Toasted susie is my ice cream" that conveys some numinous exuberance, there is a page of purgatorial claptrap and word-puzzles. Quite simply, Stein, when she is not writing in her own droll version of English for Dummies, as in *The Autobiography*, will defeat almost any reader's good intentions except those, like Toklas, who can accord her unqualified adoration.

And yet I would commend the two books—at least, Volume I—to the attention, and libraries, of most serious readers, especially those inclined to play similar tunes at their own piano. Volume I's nearly 400 pages of Stein's experimental short work includes all of *Tender Buttons*; the dithyrambling hymn to lesbian love "Lifting Belly"; "Sacred Emily" (the source of "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"); her libretto for "Four Saints in Three Acts"; and such poetical TKOs as "Patriarchal Poetry," the most extravagant of her many send-ups of polite critical discourse—a work that shows Stein the Mad Theorist firing on all twelve cylinders. Mind-numbing and mind-blowing in equal measure, "Patriarchal Poetry" makes all subsequent avant-garde experimentalists look like sophomores boasting of their hickies. The Emperor's wardrobe has nothing more exquisitely tailored than these pages of endlessly variegated, solemn nonsense.[3]

[3] Volume II has its own grave Monuments—notably the oceanic poem, *Stanzas in Meditation*—and its quirky charms, such as the short novel *Ida*, whose eponymous heroine writes to her twin self: "Do you know what I think Ida, I think that you could be a queen of beauty, one of the ones they elect when everybody has a vote." There is also her audio portrait gallery of G.I.'s of the American Occupation period, *Brewsie and Willie*, which shows Stein's uncanny and precise knack for ventriloquism.

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It helps to have heard Stein's own delivery, which was rapid-fire, carefully inflected, and calmly authoritative, even at the outer limits of glossolalia. It's a pity that The Library of America couldn't include a CD copy of the material once available on the 1956 Caedmon LP (TC1050) of Stein reading from her works. It is a greater pity that the "Notes" provided by the editors are so niggardly, even by the usually exigent standards of the series. If ever a writer cried out for editorial gloss it is Stein, and yet there are only two pages of notes to gloss the first 660 pages of text, while the ampler notes accompanying *The Autobiography* presume to inform uninstructed readers that *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* are novels by Samuel Richardson. The long out-of-print Yale edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein, by contrast, struck a good balance between too much and too little. Concerning the ten-page poem, "Yet Dish," about which the LoA offers no information, the Yale edition editor, Virgil Thomson, says it "is 'A portrait of the Jews,' its title a transyllabification of the word 'Yiddish.' . . . This skit will yield up many amusing, and some barbed, remarks to those who read it with its subject in mind." Do the LoA editors suppose that this is too obvious to need pointing out? Or that by offering such a key they might prevent readers the satisfaction of solving the puzzle on their own? The final result is that those who would pursue a serious study of the more gnomic texts will have to return to the Yale edition and other more reader-friendly reprints.

The big question, begged by almost all Stein's critics, then as now, is: Was she the great genius she thought herself—beyond, that is, her undoubted genius for self-promotion, as evidenced in *The Autobiography* and her public appearances and ex cathedra pronouncements? It has become an article of the new multicultural faith that Everyone who's published a book, or even entertained the fancy, is a Genius by virtue of having expressed her or his peculiar and singular vision. By that standard Stein is a genius, and by her own standard, as well, for one cannot doubt the sincerity of her self-esteem. It was bone-deep, and she was sincerely puzzled when readers of any couth failed to be affected in the same way she was.

Few have been. The list of critics who have sniffed, or scoffed, or simply looked the other way is extensive. Her partisans have tended to be those den mothers of the avant-garde for whom all transgressions are equally worthy of accreditation in the eyes of God and all comparison odious. This is the nature of the encomium Stein received from Richard Kostelanetz in his introduction to his 1980 paperback anthology of work drawn from the Yale edition. In this view all experiments succeed by virtue of being experimental.

My sense of the matter is that Stein's ratio of success to failure was somewhat better than that achieved by most psychics but less than that of almost any other writer of the first rank. Her courage in allowing so much of her work to be controlled by the aleatory winds of the unconscious is praiseworthy even if the result of the courage was, often

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enough, babble. It took more than courage, of course. Ingenuity figured in, as did chutzpah, and a lifetime supply of cash.

Where should a new reader begin? *The Autobiography* is guaranteed good fun, and it has become a basic document in the myth of Modernism. No other book of its era can drop so many of the right names; its anecdotes are juicy; and it is an inspiring love story (of Stein's for herself). *Three Lives* is a more doubtful proposition. It was once required reading, but in my own census of those who met that requirement there are few who remember it with even grudging admiration. It's moot whether the rest of the work included in *Writings* will share the fate of her magnum opus (not excerpted for these volumes), *The Making of Americans*, and become great dusty doorstops. There will probably be few readers who venture more than a nibble. But there will always be those able to dowse the genuine poetry latent in her work. Such a reader was Al Carmines, who, in the late sixties, set to music the text of "A Circular Play" (from *Operas and Plays*; not, alas, included in the LoA edition). The resulting musical, *In Circles*, was an ideal introduction to the real Gertrude Stein: direct, zesty, poignant, lucid, and ludic. Proof that there really was a there there, and had been all along, for those with ears tuned to receive it.

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ALFRED CORN

Hugo, Unparallelled and Representative

FROM *HENRY ESMOND:* "I HAVE SEEN in his very old age and decrepitude the old French King Louis XIV, the type and model of kinghood, who never moved but to measure, who lived and died according to the laws of his courtmartial, persisting in enacting through life the part of the Hero; and divested of poetry, this was but a little wrinkled old man, pockmarked, and with a great periwig and red heels to make him look tall—a hero for a book if you like, or for a brass statue or a painted ceiling, a god in Roman shape, but what more than a man for Mme. Maintenon, or the barber who shaved him, or M. Fagon, his surgeon? I wonder shall History ever pull off her periwig and cease to be court-ridden? Shall we see something of France and England besides Versailles and Windsor?" Thackeray's narrator puts in mordant terms what most of us have felt, if only mildly, from time to time. The French tradition, as crystallized during the *grand siècle,* can seem permanently hobbled by a marble classicism, a Cartesian insistence on mathematical order, and a state absolutism enforced down to the last article of etiquette—which courtier is permitted an armchair, which a chair without arms, which, a little tabouret, and which, the unenviable honor of standing and waiting. *"L'état, c'est moi"*: and, as a matter of course, state patronage, too, which meant that the monarch could determine the direction of art along with the rest.

To acknowledge that Descartes, Racine, Boileau, Lully, Claude Lorrain, and Le Nôtre epitomize one aspect of the French tradition is not to say that they are the sum total of it. Begin by thinking of Villon, Rabelais, LeNain, Pascal, Diderot, Sade, Berlioz, Balzac, Delacroix, Baudelaire, Courbet, Zola, Rimbaud, Toulouse-Lautrec, Jarry, Colette, Apollinaire, Breton, Michaux, Camus, Artaud, and Genet. I'd also call attention to figures much less well known like Lammenais, Péguy, and Bernanos, who embody a socialist perspective developed in connection with a Catholic faith markedly at odds with the secular conservatism dominant in French culture since the Enlightenment. To the list of nonconformists Victor Hugo also belongs, a figure who escapes neat categories by uniting within the wide-ranging compass of his personality propensities usually considered irreconcilable. Identifying him as the *chef d'école* of the Romantic movement in France is incomplete without the recognition that he brought to Romanticism a grasp of ordinary

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reality anything but dreamy (political reality not excluded), a thorough knowledge of Roman literature as well as the French neoclassical tradition, and a complete mastery of traditional verse technique. Several times expressing disdain for the classicizing alexandrine couplet, he even so composed a number of his most important works with its assistance. Positions adopted after 1851 associated him with progressive politics, yet Hugo was, for more than three decades after the fall of Napoleon I, an outspoken royalist. Because of his growing literary reputation and thumping support of the restoration, Louis XVIII gave him several handfuls of gold coins, and, during the following regime, he received an annuity from Charles X. He came to be regarded as unofficial laureate for the Bourbons, invited, in fact, to several audiences with the last in their line. Well, his mother, throughout the years of the First Empire, had been an intransigent royalist—which meant she had to overlook her husband's position as a notable general in the *Grande Armée*. Both in childhood and young adulthood, Hugo often expressed disdain for his father; taking up the royalist cause lent a political coloration to his declared allegiance to Mme. Hugo in the domestic war that the marriage had become. It's also true that kings, queens, and feudal pageantry are closer than presidents, prime ministers, and parliaments to archetypes in the unconscious, hence better adapted to the preoccupations of Romantic poetry.

Apart from odes celebrating members of the royal family and others execrating "Buonaparte" (as the ultra-royalists referred to the vanquished Emperor), Hugo's first collection of poems included a number dealing with historical topics. From the first his imagination was fired by pivotal moments in history, a tendency that blends with the Romantic aesthetic insofar as a poem borrows from the recycled event only those aspects with strong emotional resonance. Factual details can be scanted, though doing so presumes a thoroughly educated readership like Hugo's—an advantage of his lost in our day, except among a small band of quixotic "book people." The zeal to write verse history reached its most extended form in Hugo's late epic, *La Légende des siècles*, which puts lengthy scenarios from three millennia of Western mythology and history into one vast multi-chaptered poem. How should we regard Hugo's titanic ambitions here? In a recent essay, Louise Glück targets a widespread trend she terms "American narcissism," a will to colonize with selfhood what is outside of it. She takes an ironic view of American poets' readiness to appropriate external histories (indeed, "whole civilizations") for personal compositional ends. Hugo's example (not to mention Dante, Tasso, Camöens, Tennyson, Yeats) demonstrates that there's nothing peculiarly American in the discovery that you have original feelings about non-autobiographical events. Furthermore, what Glück calls "narcissism" might actually qualify as a form of modesty: "I don't know whether my private experiences and feelings merit the attention of others, and so I write on subjects that have interested the readership for a long time, in hopes of saying something new about

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them." That something new will be the author's own nature and sensibility, which may or may not be in love with its reflection. Bringing in older narratives has often been a way, too, of expanding the scope of autobiography by drawing analogies between the two orders of experience, Glück's own poetry offering at least one instance. Her *Meadowlands* juxtaposes vignettes lifted from the *Iliad* with installments in the account of her marriage's decline and fall.

An army brat, a witness to the disasters of war during the years when his father was posted to Spain after its annexation to the Empire, Hugo was better prepared than most for the literary wars triggered by the rise of Romanticism. Preliminary skirmishes with the academic old guard left opponents at a standoff; the major confrontation came only with the staging (in February of 1830 at the Comédie Française) of Hugo's play *Hernani*, a blood-and-thunder swashbuckler by no great coincidence set in Spain. Romanticism's most vociferous defenders, soon referred to as "les Jeune-France," thronged the premiere in heterodox outfits, the 1830 equivalent of green hair and pierced noses. Hugo had taken the wise precaution of papering the house, passes accorded to his shock troops in this case blood red and printed with the word "Hierro" (Spanish for "steel"). Théophile Gautier, who wrote a colorful description of the event in his *Histoire du Romantisme*, appeared in a medieval doublet made of cerise satin, pale green trousers, black jacket, and ribbon tie, an ensemble that helped launch his career just as it eventually became a sort of unshakable albatross always invoked when his name came up. The aesthetic battle between Romantics and academic classicists suddenly plunged from the arena of intellectual debate into actual fisticuffs; to boo was to risk a black eye. The war was on as newspapers and coffee houses chose up sides during the following weeks. Graham Robb, author of the present biography,[1] has this to say about the event:

> By the time *Hernani* reached the end of its run, it was clear that Hugo had been a prophet. *Hernani* was a literary virus which modified the world around it. On the stage, it was sixteenth-century Spain; in the auditorium, it was an enactment—even, in some minds, a direct cause—of what was about to happen in the streets.

Robb means Charles X's attempted coup in July of that year, when the monarch, made anxious by the rising tide of liberalism, dissolved Parliament and abrogated freedom of the press. Barricades made of paving stones, lumber and oddments went up in the streets, and within three days the insurgents, who included large numbers of Romantic militants, had won. Charles went into exile, replaced by Louis-Philippe of the Orleanist line, a constitutional monarch eager to institute liberal

[1] VICTOR HUGO: A Biography, by *Graham Robb*. W.W. Norton & Company. $39.95.

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reforms. Hugo's response was the ode "A la Jeune-France," an acrobatic performance that managed to be Bonapartist, royalist, and liberal all at once. Because it was prefaced by a note written by Sainte-Beuve declaring that the ode favored the liberal cause, Hugo was given the benefit of the doubt and allowed to retain his post as aesthetic chief of the republican dissidents. Sainte-Beuve later said that his note had effectively "deroyalized" Hugo, an assertion accurate as to Hugo's public image, though not fully descriptive of his private convictions. Little more than a decade later, Hugo accepted elevation to the rank of *pair de France,* an honor secured for him by the Duchesse d'Orléans, his ardent champion at court. Being a peer of the realm brought with it the privilege of serving in the Upper Chamber of Parliament, a task Hugo undertook with more than usual seriousness. Shelley says that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, a truth history has supported more often than Auden's counterclaim, "Poetry makes nothing happen." But Hugo preferred open acknowledgment and managed to get it.

That he would move beyond the mere shaping of public policy to direct engagement in civil war is not as astonishing as it might be when we recall his military childhood and aesthetically militant adulthood. These are the facts: In February of 1848, Louis-Philippe was overthrown by a current of insurgency self-labeled as "socialist" rather than simply liberal. Louis-Philippe's deposition differed from his cousin's in that no male heirs remained to keep the throne warm. Hugo climbed to the top of the Colonne de Juillet at the Place de la Bastille and urged the institution of a Regency under the widowed Duchesse d'Orléans—a proposal rejected out of hand by a heckling crowd of spectators below. Meanwhile, at the Hôtel de Ville, a second Republic had been proclaimed, with the poet Lamartine as head (acknowledged) of the provisional government. Hugo bowed to necessity and accepted the sop of being named mayor of his *arrondissement.* The following June he was elected as a centrist representative to the Constituent Assembly—which, however, was soon faced with another popular revolt. Emergency powers were accorded to General Cavaignac, after which Hugo and several dozen other representatives were dispatched to placate the insurgents and propose a truce. Hugo, once confronted with the barricades, overleapt the terms of his mission and ordered an artillery attack. For three days and nights he played the role of military commander sans uniform, urging on the National Guard, if not—who knows, since no complete, verifiable account of his actions was ever set down—bayoneting the occasional resister. Having concluded that the barricade-builders were the enemies of civilization, Hugo made his choice, aware that he would most probably be killed. Singling out these actions as the most repellent moment in his biography doesn't erase, at least in my mind, a grudging admiration owed any artist willing to stake his life in behalf of his convictions. The contrast is sharp between his deeds and what we expect in the careerist 1990s. So far from risking life and limb, the typical contemporary poet will not even put possible publication in

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a quarterly or prize "booty" into jeopardy by going on record with opinions unacceptable to pobiz power brokers. Hugo! thou shouldst be living at this hour.

It helps to read a note written by the warrior-poet during the uprising and its immediate repression, to the effect that, "the blood which is flowing on both sides is brave and generous blood." If some of that blood was spilled as a direct consequence of his actions, at least his conscience was divided enough to cancel any reflexive self-righteousness. Subsequent choices and penalties ought also to count as partial atonement for his role in the 1848 conflict. Too late he saw that Louis-Napoléon, whom he helped install as president of the new republic, was a tyrant in the making. In the aftermath of the coup of 1851, Hugo's attacks on the man he termed "Napoléon le petit," were sufficiently vitriolic to qualify as treasonable to the second Emperor. Hugo managed to slip out of the country and take shelter first in Belgium, then in Jersey and finally in Guernsey. The Channel Islands were English possessions yet still close to the French coast, easily accessible to admirers who came to meet the great poet in exile. Perhaps we can see Hugo's residence there as a geographic counterpart to his characteristic straddling of binaries. The colossus went on straddling until 1870, when the Second Empire was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War and Napoléon III deposed. The years of exile didn't go to waste; on the contrary, they contributed to an immeasurable expansion and deepening of the poet's sense of his vocation. In addition to a ferocious prose satire titled *Napoléon le petit*, Hugo wrote *Les Châtiments*, which put similar invective against the Second Empire into verse and, finally, the high point of Hugo's achievement in the lyric, *Les Contemplations*, a collection centered around the death of his daughter Léopoldine. Hugo's voice in this sequence manages to combine an almost bumbling naiveté with great technical refinement. Some of the poems sound a bit sentimental at first reading; on closer scrutiny subtle foreshadowings and somber undertones emerge. Elegiac lyrics like "Demain, dès l'aube" eventually give way to intimations of the poet's own eventual death and gather to a crest in his long poem "Ce que dit la bouche d'Ombre." It is a dense, wide-flung meditation that puts Pythagorean philosophy, theodicy and vision into magisterial alexandrines, at moments recalling Ulysses' "degree" speech from *Troilus and Cressida* as well as the Milton of *Paradise Lost*.

A recent exhibition of Hugo's work as a visual artist (arranged by The Drawing Center in New York) throws light on a less well known aspect of his creative gifts.[2] Hugo seems from the first to have devoted many of

[2] *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo*, The Drawing Center, New York City, May–June 1998; catalog by Luc Sante, Pierre Georgel, and Florian Rodari, published by The Drawing Center, in collaboration with Merrell Holberton. $65.00; $44.00.

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his working hours to making drawings, most with pen and ink, others using gesso, watercolor, or, at need, soot mixed with water. His skill at draftsmanship is apparent in the drawings produced during the years of exile, when the restless ocean and brooding skies of the Channel provided a subject in proportion to the scope of his imagination. But the great majority of his graphic works are dreamscapes, mappings of a sensibility impatient with the limitations of reality. Hence their visionary, almost infernal gloom—the mountain ranges glimpsed in hitherto undiscovered countries, the castles of nowhere, ruins of temples not yet built, deserted lakeside towns engulfed in fog, amoebic gargoyles spewed up from the depths. Hugo's visual experiments included turning Rorschach-style inkblots into quasi-representational subjects, or pouring ink across the paper to arrive at abstractions, or imprinting the patterns of ink-soaked lace onto paper to see what could be made of the results. In all these works the essential effort is a kind of divination: Visual elements assembled by chance form a *Gestalt* allowing the receptive haruspex to unearth ideas and feelings buried below the surface of consciousness. What is more surprising is that the drawings also evidence a strong instinct for design; most are fully effective as flat, abstract compositions, irrespective of subject matter. Some of Hugo's contemporaries, when they saw his visual art, said they preferred it to his poetry, which may of course be only clever Parisian raillery. Still, the drawings are anything but banal and ought to count as part of his achievement.

It was a foregone conclusion that Hugo, on his triumphal return to France, would be elected to the provisional government's quickly assembled legislature, a charge he nevertheless resigned after a few months' service because he was dissatisfied with the draconian peace terms the fledgling Third Republic accepted from Prussia. During a trip he made to Brussels to settle estate matters, the Paris Commune came to power by a coup that was immediately contested by forces outside the capital. Paris once again faced a siege, and a second exile began for Hugo. He was in sympathy with the ideals of the Commune but not with its leaders or their disregard for due process. Even so, when the Commune fell and Hugo returned home, he opposed the restored Third Republic's savage extermination of the Communards and all those suspected of sympathizing with them. A larger number of French citizens were killed during this period than in the Terror of 1793. Hugo's protests went begging; in fact, he became (in private) a figure of fun to the more professional politicians of the day, who even so kept him on permanent display as a republican hero beloved of the people. In 1876 Hugo was elected to the Senate, his persistent plea for amnesty voted down for nearly three years. In *L'Histoire d'un crime* (1877), Hugo offered a prose account of the 1851 coup, revisiting horrors and injustices he had dealt with in earlier works. The book played a major role in the defeat of the monarchist trend of the MacMahon government, thereby firming up the republic's democratic foundations. Hugo can't have failed to be aware that, for more than fifty years, his writings

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had made a great deal happen in literary and political spheres. And yet, despite his gigantic reputation, he never seems to have abandoned a fundamental modesty. I'm tempted to set Cocteau's too often quoted quip on its end and say that Victor Hugo was a sane man who didn't actually believe he was VICTOR HUGO.

The grizzled survivor's last years saw a steady spate of works in both prose and poetry, much of it written earlier and released at moments judged propitious. The stroke he suffered in 1878 inevitably slowed down but did not halt his normal overload of literary, political, and sexual activity, all of which persisted nearly up to his death in 1885. In this biography Graham Robb goes to great lengths to chronicle Hugo's by any measure prodigious amorous adventures, always presenting them in a satiric light. The main fault of a book we can still admire for its thoroughness and intelligence is Robb's zeal to make us laugh. Keen wit and amusing paradox, certainly an asset in brief essays, wear thin in a text of more than five hundred pages. Because Robb's skills are more the *moraliste*'s and epigrammatist's than the novelist's, this biography lacks the vivid descriptions and forward drive of a good narrative; too often it reads like an undergraduate lampoon. Large ambitions and appetites readily lend themselves to satire, but presenting Hugo's life as a series of comic turns implicitly calls into question his value as a subject. On the plus side, Robb takes Hugo's novels seriously, avoiding the assumption that their easy appropriation by Broadway and Disney automatically disqualifies them for literate interest. In any case, *L'Homme qui rit*, *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, and *Quatre-vingt-treize* are probably destined to have only readers and never theater audiences. These bizarre and weighty novels deserve more comment than a review has room for, and I recommend Robb's discussion of them. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that a larger-than-life saga like Hugo's resulted in works that (at least in adaptation) have won immense popularity more than a century after his death. Seeing that sleepy reputation wake up and stretch, I'm reminded of the nightly arrival of *Notre-Dame de Paris*'s beggars to the "Court of Miracles," where crutches are cast aside with a chuckle, amputated limbs creep out from where they've been hiding, and the eyes of the formerly blind can see fellow *misérables* reconstituted in their native vigor and acumen.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

A New Version of French Modernism

THIS KIND OF AN ANTHOLOGY, ORGANIZED AROUND THE POETIC movement of French modernism that arose in the mid-nineteenth century with the work of Baudelaire, Gautier, and Nerval, and vanished sometime between the two world wars, must be assessed on many levels, a multivalence that makes its assessment difficult.[1] First, there is the question how important French modernism was and is: what difference did it make in its own time, and how resonant is it still today? Second, how well does the translator/editor characterize modernism, both in his selection of the poems and in his commentary? Third, how good are the translations? Are they accurate, and at the same time do they work well as poems in English? Perhaps the first question should be saved for last; though it has a logical priority, its answer is easier to formulate once the second two questions have been answered.

In his brief Preface, Louis Simpson states both that his principles of selection are idiosyncratic, and that he will leave the nature of French modernism undefined, at least explicitly. Simpson writes, "A friend says that I must make it clear that this is a personal selection, for some very well known names have not been represented—Paul Valéry for example. Very well, this is a personal selection. I hope that readers will judge the collection by what I have included, not by what I have left out." At the end of the Preface, he recounts his answer to another friend who asked him why he had chosen these particular poems: "these were the poets I liked, and I liked them because they were 'modern.' The selection would make clear what the word meant." The problem of circularity is evident here. Why is the title of the book *Modern Poets of France* and not, *A Few Poems by Many of Louis Simpson's Favorite French Poets Who Lived Between 1786 and 1990*?

As it happens, I think idiosyncratic preference is sometimes quite a good principle around which to organize an anthology; but Simpson is trying to do something more objective, and it is not clear that he succeeds. He does after all try to define modernism briefly in the Preface, where he observes "The moderns make you think and feel," in contrast to poetry that is "lacking in ideas and monotonous" and "merely

[1] MODERN POETS OF FRANCE: A Bilingual Anthology, trans. and ed. by *Louis Simpson*. Story Line Press. $16.95p.

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picturesque" (the Parnassians). He also quotes Baudelaire's phrase about the modern artist who "looks for the eternal in the transitory" without holding the transitory and fugitive in contempt, as opposed to writing which is "abstract and vague" (Valéry) or "sentimental" (nineteenth-century women poets) or marked by a "lack of reality" (Hugo). But these phrases seem to me just commonplaces about what characterizes good poetry, so that what gives French modernist poetry its special place in history (and how one discerns a genuine modernist from a faux modernist) is still at issue.

Luckily, Simpson gives us much more concrete information in an eighty-page section at the end of the book, composed of brief biographical sketches of each poet, and accounts of Symbolism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, as well as Romanticism and the Parnassian movement. Here we see that the unity of French modernism may plausibly be said to consist in a series of interlinked literary circles, themselves composed of friendly and erotic couplings, rivalries, and partnerships that generated manifestos, literary magazines, scandal, and books. These social formations were not extrinsic to the art being produced, because most often the alliances (and jealousies) were formed out of mutual esteem, and the esteem was in general well-founded.

One aspect of the real usefulness of the anthology is that Simpson prefers to include a few poems by many different exponents of each sub-movement of modernism, so that the late-twentieth-century American reader with a serious interest in French poetry is bound to discover hitherto unknown but valuable minor poets. In this respect, the reader profits from Simpson's broad knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French verse, and the refinement of his taste: much of the anthology consists in the lucent tips of many on the whole not so dazzling icebergs. Fargue, Larbaud, Pozzi, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Soupault, and Péret all seem worth further investigation. Simpson also reveals novel aspects of the better known poets by selecting some of their less well known poems: Baudelaire and Desnos are cases in point. The fact that the anthology is bilingual, with the original poem and the English translation facing each other, makes this process of discovery all the more effective.

Still, even with the information added by the final section, Simpson's definition of French modernism seems problematic. The inclusion of Hugo and the Parnassians "for contrast" is inconsistent, when Valéry and various nineteenth-century figures are excluded for (in Simpson's own opinion) similar lack of modernity. Futurism was an Italian movement, though I suppose Simpson includes it as a topic because it helped Dadaism to arise from the ashes of Symbolism. The real puzzle of the anthology is the group of seven poems by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore which begins it; Desbordes-Valmore was born in 1786 and died in 1859, when anything like modernism was just getting underway. Despite my pleasure at encountering a gifted nineteenth-century French woman poet, and despite the judgment of Yves Bonnefoy that she rejected the

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"profoundly masculine" Romantic poetry of her era and its "pretensions of the Me," I can't find in these poems much evidence that she was a modernist. The following lines from "Intermittent Dream of a Sad Night," where she invokes her daughter, for instance, seem both typical and thoroughly romantic:

> Then let her go where nests sing in the sky,
> For children know that they are born to fly.
>
> Already her spirit has a taste for silence
> And rises up to where the skylarks dance,
>
> And isolated, swims beneath the azure,
> And comes back down, her throat filled with pure air.
>
> May the gray bird's hymn, so high and pious,
> Forever make her soul harmonious!

The most balanced assessment at this point may be achieved by returning to the third question and examining the best of the translations of the most moving and brilliant work of the Symbolists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, the poems that really light up the anthology. Oddly, these poems seem to me those closest in tone and intent to Simpson's own poetic corpus; and perhaps this proves in a different way not only that the anthology is idiosyncratic, but that Simpson is attracted to the period because there is something there that corresponds deeply to his own poetic project. These poems are often witty, and hover just at the frontier of the personal and the political on the one hand, and that of the ironic and the erotic on the other. Here, for example, is Larbaud's "Postscript" to the three sections of the poem "Images."

> O my God, will it never be possible
> For me to know that sweet woman over there in Little Russia,
> And those two friends in Rotterdam,
> And the young Andalusian beggar woman,
> And for me to bind myself to them
> In indissoluble friendship?
> (Alas, they will not read these poems,
> They will know neither my name nor the tenderness in my heart;
> And yet they exist, they are living *now*.)
> Will it never be possible for me to be given the great joy
> Of knowing them?
> For I don't know why, my God, but it seems that with these four
> I could conquer the world.

Larbaud, an avid traveller and literary journalist, is modern, Simpson observes, because he "gives us his impressions, and tells us what he feels,

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but he doesn't try to explain." The poet's conviction that these people, encountered by chance on his travels, make up a significant whole is so fervently portrayed that the reader begins to be persuaded. Pushed to an extreme, this is the strategy of Surrealism, to persuade the reader of the significance of odd concatenations.

When lightly undertaken, the Surrealist strategy can be quite witty, a graceful mockery, betrayal without offence. Soupault's "Palace Cinema," dedicated to Blaise Cendrars, considers the violence and anomie of city life as if it were a mildly regrettable joke.

> The wind caresses the posters
> Nothing
> the cashier is made of porcelain
>
> the Screen
>
> the automatic leader of the orchestra conducts the player piano
> there are revolver shots
>
> applause
> the stolen automobile disappears in the clouds
> and the timorous lover buys a detachable collar
>
> But soon the doors bang shut
> Today is very elegant
> He has put on his top hat
> And has not forgotten his gloves
>
> Every Friday a change of program

There is a great deal of activity in this poem, but almost no agency; a joke has pretty clearly taken place, but one isn't sure who might be its butt or raconteur.

When seriously undertaken, Surrealism aims to unseat the values of the Bourgeoisie, to change the world. The change would certainly not be political—politics is too bourgeois—but rather magical, like the flowers and LSD of the hippies fifty years later. In "Zone" (a long poem, also inspired by Cendrars), Apollinaire translates his discontents into a cityscape:

> Now you are walking in Paris in the crowd alone
> On every side herds of buses groan
> Love's anguish has you by the throat
> As if you never should be loved again
> You'd be a monk if these were the old days . . .
> You are at Paris you have been arrested

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And dragged to justice like a criminal

You have made grievous and joyful voyages
Before seeing through the lie and what the age is
You suffered from love at twenty and at thirty again
I have lived like a fool and sent my time down the drain
You no longer dare to look at your hands at any moment I could
start crying
For you for the one I love for all that you found terrifying

You regard with tearful eyes the wretched emigrants
They believe in God they pray the women nurse their infants
They fill with their smell the station of Saint Lazare
Like the Magi they have faith in their star
They hope to make some money in the Argentine
And come back to their country with a fortune
One family carries a red quilt like a heart . . .

These poems on the whole are extraordinarily associative. When they succeed, they give the impression of casting nets over the whole earth, over the cosmos, and of making everything correspond by the sheer force of human will. The result is like standing on top of the Eiffel Tower or the Chrysler Building: a grand synthetic view won in virtue of a magnificent but fragile artifice.

Simpson's translations are less successful to the extent that they depart from his own taste for free verse, and for associative poems integrated by feeling, fragmentary narrative, and language. Some of the most memorable lines of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, for example, don't come across in the English. Simpson's self-imposed constraint, to translate the rhyme and meter of the original, seems to work against him here. For example, the opening quatrain of Baudelaire's "Correspondences" becomes,

Nature is a temple. The columns are
Alive and sometimes vaguely seem to talk;
There are symbols in the forest where we walk
That watch us, and they seem familiar.

The loss of the three beautiful, parallel phrases, "*vivants piliers*," "*confuses paroles*," and "*regards familiers*" seems a shame, as well as that of the phrase on which, to my mind, the whole quatrain turns: "*forêts de symboles.*"

Verlaine's "Autumn Song" becomes,

Violins complain
Of autumn again,

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They sob and moan.
And my heartstrings ache
Like the song they make,
A monotone.

The "*violons / De l'automne*" aren't complaining about autumn, but are themselves autumnal; and they do not moan (though "*sanglots*" is admittedly a tough word to translate). Verlaine would not have been guilty of the dead metaphor "heartstrings" if it had existed in French, and "*une langueur*" is not an ache; moreover, it's not the music of the violins which is monotonous, but the feeling in the poet ("*une langueur*") it gives rise to. Likewise, some of the most vivid images in Mallarmé's "Sea Breeze" completely disappear, sacrificed to the demands of meter and rhyme in English. These poems, especially the ones that readers will have memorized years ago in school, are terribly difficult to render in English; by insisting on the reproduction of rhyme and meter, the poet makes his task too difficult.

The mention of poems that linger in one's memory for decades brings back the question, how important were the French modernists after all? In the retrospect of over a hundred years, it seems as if the cultural influence of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé is as pervasive and permanent as that of Monet, Cézanne, and van Gogh. As the painters changed our way of seeing, the poets changed our way of hearing and feeling: their ironic music has become inescapable. So too their French *topoi*, a nineteenth-century Provence, Normandy, and Paris of the imagination, seem to inhabit us. But whereas the influence of Symbolism seems due to those three great figures, that of Dadaism and Surrealism seems more collective. No great poet or poets loom much above the rest, but Surrealism's odd, subversive way of understanding the world was irrepressible, at least between the wars. The Nazis detested it as heartily as they detested Expressionism, and their condemnation defined its genius quite precisely.

I doubt that any major American poet of the second half of the twentieth century escaped the study of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. And Surrealism has resurfaced in every decade: in the Beat poetry of the fifties, the acidic poetry of the sixties, the dream poetry of the seventies, the language poetry of the eighties, and in the nineties . . . ? Perhaps it is still too soon to pronounce on our own decade. Speaking for myself, I find much to admire (and imitate, in the middle-aged poet's endless *études of finitude*) at the level of music and idea in these poets. But as to wisdom, only Baudelaire seems to me finally sustaining. Perhaps Romanticism was marked, as Bonnefoy said, by "the pretensions of the Me," but these poets who contested Romanticism also often seem immature and self-centered, and even intellectually lazy in their refusal to seek "explanations."

Still, to be fair, these poets have a sense of humor and an exacerbated self-reflectiveness that in the best poems lead to its own brand of

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wisdom, perhaps a wisdom most appropriate to our bloody century. Simpson sets his exact and heartfelt rendition of Apollinaire's "The Pretty Redhead" last in the book, even after the biographical notes, clearly as his last attempt to show what modernism meant and may still mean. Apollinaire begins the poem by introducing himself.

Here I am before you all a man full of sense
Knowing life and of death what a living man may know
Having experienced the griefs and joys of love
Sometimes being able to impose his ideas
Knowing several languages
Having traveled quite a bit
Having seen war in the artillery and infantry
Wounded in the head trepanned under chloroform
Having lost his best friends in the frightful struggle
I know of the ancient and modern as much as a man by himself may
know of them both
And without worrying today about this war
Between us and for us my friends
I am judging that long quarrel of tradition and invention
Of Order and Adventure

The rest of the poem addresses the reader, and seems to speak far and wide, across the century and the oceans. Apollinaire tries to explain the wisdom that bitter experience has left him with, self-mockingly begs the reader for indulgence, and in the end invokes, of all things, Reason. And Reason turns out to be, of all things, the pretty redhead.

Her hair is gold a glimmer
A beautiful light goes with her
Like the flames proudly displayed
In tea roses when they fade

But laugh laugh at me
Men everywhere especially here
For there are so many things I dare not say
So many things you would not let me say
Have pity on me

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JOHN HAINES

Poetry Chronicle

ONE OF THE MELANCHOLY FACTS OF LATE LITERARY LIFE is the periodic dying off of one's contemporaries, poets of one's own generation or older, and sometimes younger. The death late last year of Denise Levertov was such an instance, and there have been others in the past half-decade. Meanwhile, the growing numbers of books by younger talents, a few of whom may one day prove to be an adequate replacement for our losses.

A handsome new Graywolf Press edition of William Stafford's poems[1] affords us a fresh look at one of the major figures of our time. Is there another American poet in whose work one can find, if at times half-disguised, so much of contemporary history and events? In whose poems so much, both familiar and strange, is reflected, and all in that calm, neighborhood voice of his? When he says "we," as he often does, you know he means it.

> Mine was a Midwest home—you can keep your world.
> Plain black hats rode the thoughts that made our code.
> We sang hymns in the house; the roof was near God.
> "One Home"

A poetry so offhand at times, you think it might have been written by almost anyone. And then one realizes that no one else could have written so wisely and convincingly of ordinary events, like returning to a town in which one grew up.

> When I came back I saw many sharp things:
> the wild hills coming to drink at the river,
> the church pondering its old meanings.
> I believe the hills won; I'm afraid
> the girl who used to sing in the choir
> broke into jagged purple glass.
> "Back Home"

Many of the better known, anthologized poems, "Traveling Through the Dark," "At the Bomb-Testing Site," "The Epigraph Ending in And," "The Farm On the Great Plains," need not be quoted here. Rather, I would call attention to, among so many others, poems like "Back

[1] THE WAY IT IS: New & Selected Poems, by *William Stafford.* Graywolf Press. $24.95.

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Home," "At Our House," "Things I Learned Last Week"; that unusual poem, "Judgements," with its repeated phrase, "I accuse . . . "; and still another haunting piece, "New Letters to Thomas Jefferson," a prose poem written as a sequence of four letters addressed, apparently, to George Washington, and from which I quote the last:

From Monticello

My Old Friend,

This morning the bees were swarming in the window well of the washroom. Birds were hunting each other. The root of the big yellow poplar was holding quiet as ever. Despite what we know and have done, I felt limited, alone. Across the morning light, particles were signaling what I cannot see.

As Ever,
Thomas Jefferson

It is a tribute to Stafford's skill and inventiveness that—as the story goes—a Jefferson scholar who by some chance read this poem, inquired of the poet where he had found the letters!

In Stafford's work we find an unfailing sense of time and place; we know where we are at this late end of the century. As Naomi Shihab Nye comments in her preface to this volume, "Rarely has a voice felt so intimate and so collective at once." Even when poems appear somewhat incidental to the best work, the supporting contribution is evident. And perhaps no other poet in our time has conveyed so consistent a sense of the American West and Midwest: "In scenery I like flat country. / In life I don't like much to happen" ("Passing Remark"). A steadiness, braced with humor, as of someone poised to keep his balance in an uncertain world.

I last met with William Stafford at Ohio University's annual Literary Festival in the spring of 1993. He seemed at the time to be well and in his accustomed good spirits. In late August of that year I had a phone call from a friend in Tennessee, informing me that Stafford had died suddenly at his home in Oregon. And so the passing of another friend and fellow poet—of so unique a man and talent, rare in any age with his total absence of career politics and all related game-playing; an integrity that informs the poems as well. From beginning to end, a steady devotion and accomplishment:

No sound—a spell—on or out
where the wind went, our kite sent back
its thrill along the string that
sagged but sang and said, "I'm here!
I'm here!" till broke somewhere,
gone years ago, but sailed forever clear
of earth. I hold—whatever tugs
the other end—I hold that string.

"Father and Son"

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To turn from Stafford's poems to the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski[2] is to depart from a familiar terrain and enter another space altogether, strangely removed from our still coherent neighborhoods:

> Europe is already sleeping, Night's animals,
> mournful and rapacious
> move in for the kill.
> Soon America will be sleeping too.
> "Houston, 6 p.m."

I think I would know, without being told, that these lines were not written by an American. Indeed, it is hardly possible to find in this slim book a poem in which the history of our time is not in some way acknowledged. The events, the terrible absences, are there, even when not directly referred to.

> The train stopped at a little station
> and for a moment stood absolutely still.
> The doors slammed, gravel crunched underfoot,
> someone said goodbye forever,
>
> a glove dropped, the sun dimmed,
> the doors slammed again even louder,
> and the iron train set off slowly
> and vanished in the fog like the nineteenth century.
> "Iron Train"

If one has something to say, a few words will suffice. No thoughtful European writer today can entirely dismiss that inherited knowledge of camps and trains and exile—so lasting and searing an experience shared to a greater or lesser degree by every nation on the continent. And this fact alone will distinguish the writing from its American counterpart. The difference can be said to lie in that fact that, in the present case, Zagajewski has this knowledge as part of himself; he doesn't have to invent it: "You are my silent brethren, / the dead, / I won't forget you."

The one word, "refugees," calls up an image all too universal even now:

> and always that special slouch
> as if leaning toward another, better planet,
> with less ambitious generals,
> less snow, less wind, fewer cannons,
> less History (alas, there's no

[2] MYSTICISM FOR BEGINNERS, by *Adam Zagajewski.* Trans. by *Clare Cavanagh.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $20.00.

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such planet, just that slouch).

Shuffling their feet,
they move slowly, very slowly,
toward the country of nowhere
and the city of no one
on the river of never.
"Refugees"

Even a consideration of Dutch painting, with its allusions to some of the famous works of a classical period, cannot be made entirely free of our modern history:

Doors were wide open, the wind was friendly.
Brooms rested after work well done.
Homes bared all. The painting of a land
without secret police.
Only on young Rembrandt's face
an early shadow fell. Why?
Tell us, Dutch painters, what will happen
when the apple is peeled, when the silk dims,
when all the colors grow cold.
Tell us what darkness is.
"Dutch Painters"

In an extended review of Zagajewski's work published in *The New Republic*, and in speaking of the often divided position of a writer in Poland today, the critic Adam Kirsch had this to say:

> The dilemma of solidarity and solitude is unfamiliar to an American, and it may be difficult for an American to enter into it fully. Here poetry is such a minor, sidelined pursuit that its practitioners by and large never even think of using their art to serve a larger cause . . . For some critics—George Steiner most egregiously—this amounts to a complacency that diminishes American Art. On this view, the moral crisis of Eastern Europe gives poetry an urgency and a public stature it can never have in the United States, where it is largely a hobby confined to writing workshops.[3]

Kirsch's remarks appear to me consistent with what I have found in reading through well over twenty books for this review.

A typical modern exile, Zagajewski lives in Paris and teaches for part of the year at the University of Houston in Texas. This is the third of his books to appear in English, and the first I have read. Of the translations,

[3] Adam Kirsch, "The Lucid Moment," *The New Republic*, March 23, 1998.

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and with no knowledge of the Polish language, I can only say that they appear to be faithful to the originals and result in poems that are moving and instructive in their own right.

This is otherwise a book to be taught by, in which a single stanza may hold, concentrated in a few words, more knowledge than is likely to be found in a year's subscription to your favorite newspaper or literary journal.

> Wisdom can't be found
> in music or fine paintings,
> in great deeds, courage,
> even love,
> but only in all these things,
> in earth and air, in pain and silence.
>
> "Shell"

To turn at this point to the American poet Frederick Feirstein[4] is to make yet another radical adjustment, and to enter a world largely removed from that painful history so clearly represented in the work of a contemporary Polish poet. The transition, rightly perceived, tells us something about our place as Americans in a world marked indelibly by events to which we have contributed while remaining at a sometimes thoughtful, sometimes indifferent distance.

Mr. Feirstein has received high praise from a number of his contemporaries. I have until now read little of his work other than that to be found in journals and anthologies. Often identified with the new formalist school, he writes primarily in traditional measures and in narrative, a neglected form that has in recent years been taken up by younger poets. Here is a sample passage:

> The past is like a library after dark
> Where we sit on the steps trading stories
> With characters we imagined ourselves to be.
> Neighbors in clothing from our childhood stroll by,
> Unmolested, nodding at us, benevolently.
> One with your father's face tips his fedora.
> You lower your eyes in shame. I look back.
> Someone is sitting at a long table,
> Reading in the moonlight. I must look startled.
> He holds a forefinger to his lips
> As if it is a candle for the dead.
>
> "Manhattan Elegy"

[4] NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, by *Frederick Feirstein*. Story Line Press. $14.00p.

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"Manhattan Elegy" is part of a longer sequence of poems, a retelling of early life in New York, addressed to friends and written primarily in the present tense. Another poem in the sequence, "Song of the Suburbs," opens with these two stanzas:

> The prospect of an automatic life:
> Working from nine to five, dinner, then bed,
> Maybe a night or two with the wife;
> Watching t.v. or visiting the dead
>
> Or fixing doorknobs or the sink on weekends.
> That's what we rebelled against in youth.
> We were going to fix the world, set social trends
> In conscript dungarees. We possessed the truth.

And I would call attention to "Twentieth Century," vivid in its evocation of a vanished New York City: "A winter evening under a John Sloan EL. / Fedoras tilt in unison against the wind."

"Family History," another narrative sequence, is engrossing in its characters, and with its irregular rhyming:

> How can I tell you, where do I begin?
> In Poland, a rich old man is asked to choose
> Between daughter and mother for his bride.
> He sighs, he shrugs, he strokes his whiskered chin.
> Shrewdly he takes a season to decide,
> There are no pogroms yet to rush the Jews.
> . . . . . .
> On my mother's side were Sam and Annie,
> Mild second cousins from the Russian Pale,
> Seemingly just my Jewish Gramps and Grannie
> Until, of course, I heard my uncle's tale.
> I loved my Grandma like the birds she fed.
> She spoke just a few English words, like, "Fred."

The individuals in the poems are often vivid and believable, a past recaptured in its telling. It is a world far removed from the one to be found in Zagajewski's poems, and to that extent seems at times lacking in something essential to our age. To compare the two poets would perhaps be unfair: the one so expansive and American, the other haunted, concentrated on a history half-obliterated. Nonetheless, there is an underlying criticism implied here, one that will have to be dealt with sooner or later.

Mr. Feirstein is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City. As such he must have abundant opportunity to observe people in their private lives as well as in their public behavior. To a considerable extent this is revealed and at times celebrated in his poems:

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Thus at Ratner's I began my history
While ordering a travelogue of food:
Cheese and blueberry blintzes, eggs, onions and lox,
Kasha varnishkes, borscht, mushroom and barley soup
—Enough to keep off thoughts of our mortality . . .
"Celebrating"

In his readable and intelligent book of essays on poetry, *One of the Dangerous Trades*,[5] Peter Davison writes of what he calls "The Refuge of the Present Tense." It is a failing all too evident in the majority of books I have considered for this review, and I am grateful to Mr. Davison for pointing it out so clearly. In the context he also remarks: "What of the poet's timeless roles: scribe, historian, cantor, prophet, musician, elegiast?" And he goes on to say: "Today . . . our poets are not up to revolution. The status quo is too important to them. Not only their lives but their works, ignore the past, belittle the future . . . they stick to the things they know: the present, the visible limits of their lives, the confines of their affairs. Even the tenses of their language reflect their commitment to the immediate present, to a world devoid of history."

Further consideration of Davison's words brings me to the poems of Thomas McGrath,[6] who died in 1990 and whose world is by no means devoid of history. In his *Selected Poems, 1938–1988*, I turn to his "Elegy for the American Dead in Asia," one of the true and moving poems of our time, and which ends with these lines:

And the public mourners come: the politic tear
Is cast in the Forum. But, in another year,
We will mourn you, whose fossil courage fills
The limestone histories: brave: ignorant: amazed:
Dead in the rice paddies, dead on the nameless hills.

Nothing finer has been written of American involvement in the Asian wars.

Letter to an Imaginary Friend is McGrath's major work. Many years in the making, the first part of it was published in 1963, and the last of its four parts completed in 1985. Poets and critics as different as Amy Clampitt and Philip Levine have praised it. Part diary, part letter, part history and polemics, it is, as Sam Hamill in his preface has called it, "a grand work of memory and recovery." Not perhaps since William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound has a poet undertaken so ongoing an epic and prevailed to the end.

The poem begins in the country of his birth, in North Dakota, and

[5] Peter Davison, *One of the Dangerous Trades* (Ann Arbor, 1991).

[6] LETTER TO AN IMAGINARY FRIEND, by *Thomas McGrath*. Copper Canyon Press. $35.00; $20.00.

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moves out into the wider world in his psychological and mythological journey, into the space of country, nation, politics, war and what seems to be an always diverted homecoming—from the family farm of his boyhood, schoolyard, college, and labor, and all in a circular pattern. Early in the poem he writes of leaving home and family:

> How could I leave them?
> I took them with me, though I went alone
> Into the Christmas dark of the woods and down
> The whistling slope of the coulee, past the Indian graves
> Alive and flickering with the gopher light.
>
> Part One

The freshness of the language endures. Later, he writes from another place that is still the same place:

> Dream and despair: the journey around a wound . . .
> Circularity again, with nothing laid true in a straight line
> Nor square with the sailor star nor the fence of the north forty
> But turning, turning . . .
> Dakota, New York, Europe, Dakota again,
> Los Angeles Frisco Dakota New York, Los Angeles
> Turning and turning . . .
> Outbound on the far night journey . . .
>
> Part One

And later still:

> . . . too dark to say anything clearly, but not too dark
> To see . . .
> one foot in early twilight, the other in snow,
> (Now failing away in the western sky where a fair star
> Is traveling our half-filled trail from the still, far field—
> O rare light!—trailing us home toward the farmhouse lamp)
>
> Part Three

McGrath's personal history is unusual among poets in our time: WW II veteran, Rhodes scholar, labor organizer, blacklisted for his socialist sympathies in the McCarthy era—a varied background that certainly fed the man and poet. When he speaks, as he often does, of the "companions" and "brothers," he is not using a figure of speech for effect; he means it, having lived himself in a time when men, and women, might indeed be brothers and companions in a rightful cause. Of course, this fact also set him apart from most of his tenured contemporaries (though once perhaps it might not have done so) and his reputation has to an extent suffered accordingly.

Within the context of this review, a considered comparison of the

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work of McGrath and Frederick Feirstein might be a worthy undertaking: two views of history, two ways of telling. And with the example of both McGrath and Zagajewski in mind, I would suggest once more our need for a poetry that can include political thought and the philosophy of political life. If poets cannot be teachers, they are merely entertainers and of passing importance.

Then, Night.
Night, first of the high, great fog: blown down
From the vast Siberias and freezing unknown lands
Of the fierce bear and blue shy fox.
Blown past our sleep
Into the ninety-mile wind, a shifting of space itself.

Night of the Army then: its paper snow: proper:
And its fog of number: cold: and its graceless mossy
Sleep, like wine in a stone ear.
Part One

An epic in the tradition of Williams' *Paterson* and Pound's *Cantos,* its varying verse lines are filled with action, with talk, memory, personal and family history, love, and news of the world. The underlying landscape remains that of the West and the high plains, their snow and wind and spaces. But it is also the landscape of human pain and want, of injustice, of theft and oppression; a work also of humor and a kind of lyrical retaliation.

I do not feel comfortable in attempting to summarize in a brief review a work of this scope. Let me instead direct potential readers to Sam Hamill's "Preface," and to the supporting "Afterword" by the editor Dale Jacobson. And I would suggest further that readers give this book and the other work by this poet their dedicated attention. If poetry still means anything in this media-haunted world, here is a place to begin.

Meanwhile, and with the man and poet in mind, I would close with this brief personal acknowledgement: "Dear Tom, rest easy, you are not forgotten."

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LOUIS SIMPSON

The Vertical and Horizontal of Love

THERE ARE THOSE WHO READ THE BIBLE AS FACT. Jonah was swallowed by a big fish and, three days later, thrown up live and whole. They think that mainline Baptists and Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, liberals, gays, anyone who doesn't believe as they do, is destined for hell, and they would like to see their beliefs passed by Congress into law. In *Stealing Jesus*, Bruce Bawer explains the origins of this kind of thinking—fundamentalism—which he finds to be a clear and present danger to a free society.[1]

He traces the beginnings of fundamentalism to certain teachings by the founder of Christianity. Paul had good things to say about loving one another. He said that faith and hope were virtues, but without love they would be empty. But this is not the Paul that fundamentalists quote—they prefer his sayings that call down the wrath of God on sinners, and his admonitions. He said that women must obey their husbands, slaves their masters, and everyone should be submissive to the government and authorities. If anyone was "contentious" he should be warned, and if he persisted he should be excluded from the community, for he had a distorted mind and stood "self-condemned in sin." He said that the only people who had reason to fear the authorities were criminals.

Christianity has taken many turnings since Paul spoke, including the belief that the Bible must be read literally, everything it says taken to be true, but fundamentalism as we know it, "dispensational" fundamentalism, is of recent growth. In 1835, David Friedrich Strauss, the German theologian, published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, separating historical elements from those that were only legendary. Other scholars followed, using archaeological discoveries to place the life of Jesus and his teachings and show that these had been distorted by the Church. This—the Higher Criticism, as it was called—and Darwin's theory of evolution, undermined the faith of those who held that the Bible was literally true. The Civil War, which threw society into chaos, made Americans want a faith that would put all their doubts to rest.

They found the answer in John Nelson Darby's dispensationalism—a theology, Bawer says, that "without the slightest regard for scientific method . . . exhibits a rigor, complexity and internal consistency that can make it look quite scientific to people who don't know any better."

[1] STEALING JESUS: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity, by *Bruce Bawer*. Crown Publishers. $26.00.

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Darby's theology is founded on typology—events being prefigured in the Bible—on numerology, and interpretations of apocalyptic passages. Dispensational fundamentalism, "without which Protestant fundamentalism as we know it would not exist," breaks history into periods or dispensations, each with its set of divine laws. We are in the sixth dispensation, "an era marked by apostasy and the erosion of Christian morality." This will be followed by the Rapture, when all Christians who have been saved will ascend into the sky to meet Christ and be protected from the Great Tribulation, a time of violence and doubt. After this, Christ will return to earth to reign for a thousand years and judge mankind.

By 1882, when both Darwin and Darby died, this theology "had virtually supplanted Christian belief in many mainline Protestant churches." The extent of this displacement, Bawer says, "would be hard to exaggerate." Millions of Protestants saw salvation as dependent not only on acceptance of Jesus as Savior, but acceptance of the whole dispensational historical scheme. Those who believed in the dispensations and the Rapture would be saved, those who didn't would go to hell. The 1909 Scofield Reference Bible, made by a preacher in Texas, C. I. Scofield, codified and spread the gospel of dispensationalism.

"Where," Bawer asks, "does love fit into this picture?" The answer is, "Nowhere." The kingdom described by Jesus, that can be attained through love of God and one's neighbor, is replaced by a kingdom that can be entered only by subscribing to dispensationalist theology. "Darby laid the foundations of legalistic Protestant belief in America today. Few men or women of his century exerted more influence on twentieth-century American culture." Those of us who went to college and read Darwin, Marx, and Freud, but never heard of John Nelson Darby, have a lot to learn. It seems we are quite ignorant of what millions of our fellow-citizens think and why they vote as they do.

It was possible for some churchgoers to accommodate Darwinian science. In the movie *Inherit the Wind* about the trial of a schoolteacher for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution, the lawyer for the defense tucks both *Origin of Species* and the Bible under one arm. Other Protestants were thoroughly legalistic: their belief hardened into "a transcendental irrational article of faith that allowed for no exceptions whatsoever." Darby's teachings were spread by the popular evangelist Dwight L. Moody, through his sermons and his Moody Bible Institute. But Moody preached the love of God—his present-day heirs are far more legalistic.

What of the mainline Protestant churches? Methodism, founded in the eighteenth century by John Wesley, began as a movement to revitalize Christianity. It became the largest of the Protestant mainline churches. There is a wide range of belief among Methodists. There are Pentecostals who believe in faith healing, prophecies, and speaking in tongues. At the other extreme were my aunts who sat on the veranda every afternoon fanning themselves. Now and then Aunt May would

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speak about something the Reverend had said, or with pursed lips comment on the meandering of the "garden boy." On Sunday they wouldn't stir; they sat still in fear, and far from being Pentecostal spoke in hushed tones.

Baptists today are the largest group of American Protestants. The Baptists, who began as a fringe group in England, grew enormously in the nineteenth century. As Bawer says, their history is surprising. In an early twentieth-century high school textbook about Baptist belief, W. R. White noted that for Baptists "the individual is primary. . . . No building, work of art, human or religious institution is to be valued above him." This belief in individualism went together with an insistence on total freedom of conscience. For Baptists, "the New Testament—*not* the harsh edicts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy—is their 'law and only law.' " In 1909, another Baptist, Philip L. Jones, declared that "the doctrine of the individual relationship of the soul to God has always and everywhere been insisted upon by Baptists."

But today many traditional Baptists believe that they must distrust their consciences, which may be manipulated by Satan. They regard any other than a literal reading of the Bible as heresy, and prefer the harshest Old Testament readings to any pronouncement taken from the Gospels. The Southern Baptists emphasize God's wrath far more than his love. They agitate for laws and constitutional amendments permitting organized school prayer—the very opposite of the freedom of conscience advocated in "classical Baptist" attitudes.

Fundamentalism makes strange bedfellows. In a 1995 item about the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, the magazine *American Enterprise* condemned "a group of lesbian feminists" who protested at that conference as "forces of cultural decadence." The writer found it "heartening" that fundamentalist Moslems were uniting with legalistic Christians to stand up for "wholesomeness and sanity." Bawer comments: "among the manifestations of 'wholesomeness and sanity' for which Islamic fundamentalists have been responsible in recent years are the execution of adulterers and homosexuals, the total subjugation of women, and the crushing of democratic institutions, religious freedom, and civil rights generally."

To such fanatic legalism, which Bawer calls the Church of Law, he contrasts a Church of Love. I wish he had chosen another name for his point of view, for the word church means an organization with a history and rituals, and suggests that you could walk around the corner and find it, and might prefer it to the church you are presently attending . . . which is not at all Bawer's intention. He himself is an Episcopalian and seems quite happy to be one. By Church of Love he means a community of minds that agree on the central message of Jesus, that they should love one another, with a love that is not confined by denominational barriers.

Bawer sees Jesus' death on the cross as a symbol of God's love for suffering mankind. The Church of Law, on the other hand, sees the

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crucifixion as a ransom Jesus paid for our sins. Salvation doesn't depend on your being what the world calls "good." Do you believe in the crucifixion as the sacrifice by Jesus that absolves you of sin? If you do, then your place in heaven is assured. (In the eighteenth century some people reasoned that if you were one of the Elect your sins, future as well as past, had been forgiven. So in theory you were free to lie, steal, rape, or commit murder. The Church rejected this mad idea of the doctrine of predestination, but it comes creeping back in fundamentalist thinking.)

According to Bawer, Jesus taught that God loves all people (the Church of Law excludes many). "Eternal life" means "a unity with God that exists outside the dimensions of time and space and that can also be expressed in this life." Satan is a metaphor for "the potential for evil that exists in each person, Christian or otherwise, and that must be recognized and resisted."

Bawer believes that "the mind is a gift of God and that God wants us to think for ourselves"; that truth is known only to God, and religion can only point the way; that the Bible must be read "critically and intelligently, and with an understanding of its historical and cultural contexts"; and that nonlegalistic Protestantism "encourages a recognition of mystery and beauty as attributes of the holy." I find this idea of religion very agreeable. Keats was also of this mind—he said that "Beauty is truth." But I would not go as far as Keats does when he turns the equation around and says that truth is beauty. There are many truths that are not at all beautiful.

This brings me to my only criticism of Bawer's excellent book. He seems to think that expressing "love" is a solution to all problems. If "the potential for evil that exists in each person" remains in the person's head it cannot do much harm, except to the one who has it. But suppose it is put into action? Suppose it is violent? In the gospel Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. But what of your aged parents, your wife and children, and your neighbor, the one Jesus said you were to love? Will you turn the other cheek when he is taken to the gas chamber? In its elevation of the meek Christianity seems to urge peace at any price, and this is the reason many good people don't go to church.

How do you deal with the one who hates? All you can do, Bawer says, is "assure him, that you care about him and are there for him, and pray that the Holy Spirit will help him to discern, to accept, and to return that higher all-subsuming love that no one can take away from him. That, in this world, is our job as Christians." It sounds like an easy, perhaps even a pleasant job. What about genocide? Shall we talk him out of that too?

Stealing Jesus is more than a book about fundamentalism—it makes you ask what you believe and what choices you must make. Bawer says that the reason fundamentalists won't tolerate any questioning of their religion is that they don't believe in it themselves. They have had no direct experience of love—they have to be told what to believe. They

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think that religion is a thing someone has made up, that it won't bear examination.

In the village, Setauket, where I live, we have a group of readers who meet every month to discuss a book. I urged them to read Bawer's *Stealing Jesus.* In recent years the media had very little to say about religion—faith is a touchy subject . . . why roil the waters? They did not report, for example, on the anti-Semitism of the TV evangelist, Pat Robertson. But these days fundamentalists are thriving, getting a book banned here, unseating a congressman there. Preachers on the religious right command large congregations. It behooves us to know something about their beliefs. Bawer has read and digested the fundamentalist works which few of us would want to read for ourselves. He is a brilliant and—in a good cause, toleration—an impassioned writer.

The day before we were to discuss *Stealing Jesus* I came across an essay by Professor George Anastaplo of Loyola University that sounded a warning. He said that discussions of religion were likely to become "contending expressions of faith by various readers," and this would be followed by acute embarrassment and silence. When the group met, I asked a question that I hoped would strike a note of moderation. Was the extreme, legalistic fundamentalism Bawer described the only kind? Or was there a more reasonable version?

These readers were neither embarrassed nor silent. Some of them had even read authors listed by Bawer in his bibliography. I had not read them. Fortunately I was not leading the discussion—our group has no leader, everyone just pitches in. What followed was not so much a discussion as an exposition by nine people of what they believed and could not believe.

I said that I believed that something tremendous happened at the crucifixion, beyond the bounds of reason, that shook the observers . . . but I could not believe in the resurrection. When were the Gospels written? ("What is truth?" said Pilate.) A member of the group said that Paul was nearest in time to the event . . . some thirty years after. Well, I said, when time has passed and people want to believe that a thing is true. . . .

No one rose and denounced me for doubting one of the tenets of the Nicene Creed. We were different one from another and willing to let it go at that. A democratic, American solution, though not theology . . . The author of *Stealing Jesus* had led the way—he was expressing his feelings, urging us to give our allegiance to Jesus—the Jesus who was "incontrovertibly human." "We don't spread the gospel," he said, the news of God's love, by "becoming Bible-thumping missionaries. We do it by loving. *Loving.*"

Bawer too was stealing Jesus. Everyone steals Jesus—he answers to what each one needs, each in a different way. The prominent New York Baptist minister, Harry Emerson Fosdick, once gave a sermon, "Shall

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Fundamentalism Win?," in which he said, "No idea of the Eternal which is not vague can possibly approximate the truth." This sentence strikes me as incontrovertible. The fundamentalist idea of dispensation and the Rapture is unbelievable because it is so exact. The facts are all-important, as in the stories children make up.

But Bawer's appeal to feeling is also thumping . . . the New Testament. He suggests that every difficulty can be overcome by *loving*, but there are strong virtues the human race must exercise if it is to survive. This is why people go to church. They could do their meditating at home, but a church is a way of life.

The Eternal is vague, but a church cannot be vague if it is to do any good. A church has to be . . . something. I can understand a church that is Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian or Episcopalian, but not a church that tells us that our whole duty is to love. In appealing to all it may minister to none. Poverty, disease, war, or just the troubles of every day call for something besides what Bawer calls *loving*. Evil won't go away—it asks for rules we can live by. Rules are not laws, we can break them when we have to, but without them we are left in the dark.

Bawer does not speak of evil as we have known it in our time. In this he is typical of the Church. I am using the word Church to mean Christians of all dominations. The Church has been shamefully silent about the Holocaust and similar atrocities . . . so many that they have merged in a nameless cloud. Bawer says that the problem of evil has not been "sufficiently recognized." I'll say it hasn't!

The twentieth-century American theologian Paul Tillich distinguishes between two ways of relating to the world that he labels "horizontal and vertical." By the vertical Tillich means spirituality, by the horizontal social relations. Is it possible to strike a right balance between spiritual and active life?

It does seem possible when we read the autobiography of Paul Moore.[2] He was born into a very wealthy family, attended a church school, St. Paul's (Episcopalian), and a university, Yale, and saw combat on Guadalcanal where he took a bullet in the chest that nearly killed him. He studied Anglican religion at the General Theological Seminary in Manhattan, and began his work as a priest at Grace Church in Jersey City, among the poor. There were black and Hispanic gangs. By sheer diligence and "outreach" he gathered a flock. When he moved on to well endowed, white churches he brought "radical" ideas with him.

He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., at Selma in the struggle for civil rights, and he opposed the war in Vietnam. He proceeded from the care of souls to the management of churches, which at times must have seemed about as spiritual as being on the board of Standard Oil. If his brand of Christianity offended some parishioners others endorsed it,

[2] PRESENCES, by *Paul Moore.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $40.00.

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and he was elected Bishop. Meanwhile he and his wife Jenny had nine children.

They didn't live on inherited money but on his clegyman's salary, and the moneyed background could be an obstacle when he dealt with the poor. Some of them accused the Bishop of being a rich man. In New York, at a "peace rally" at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a crowd of "shirtless young men" carrying what looked like spears—not spears but Vietcong flags—rushed at the Bishop as if to impale him. But he threw his arms wide and called on them in the name of Almighty God to stop. And they did. Few people have had a life as full of adventure as this churchman's. He says, "I love excitement."

He traveled in search of it to Japan, India, and Saigon where he led a march for peace and was tear-gassed by South Vietnamese soldiers. He traveled to the Soviet Union, met our Soviet counterparts in the Cold War, and found that they were as fearful as Americans of starting a nuclear war. He traveled in Nicaragua and came to know and sympathize with the Sandinistas. He traveled to South Africa and met with those who were struggling against apartheid. He brought a message of peace to East Timor. At home he spoke for gays in their struggle for civil rights.

Did all this horizontality result in a loss of spirituality, the vertical dimension? Moore writes of his share in human suffering. At times when he spoke in public about some matter that moved him deeply he would shed tears. He didn't have much time for beauty, a form of life sufficient in itself that appeals strongly to poets like the author of *Stealing Jesus*, but it is well that there are men and women of feeling like Moore who also have executive ability. They make it possible for stonecutters and sculptors, painters, musicians, and poets to build the cathedral and not be impaled on banners.

The Bishop is an honest man and lays his cards on the table. He is an activist and doesn't put much stock in words though he has used them himself to good effect . . . he uses words for a purpose. This is justified in action. "The words of Jesus," he says, "were not as important as his death and resurrection; in fact, his words would not be remembered had he not given his life on the cross."

I do not agree. The sayings and parables of Jesus continue to sound as though he were actually standing before us. His words have become our thoughts and being. They would have been remembered in any case.

But Moore is right in turning our attention to the cross. We have to see it for ourselves. There is no end to religious controversy. Christianity has split into many forms, and people continue to find new names for what they believe, but the separation ceases when we see what was actually happening.

It was there that love began. Those who witnessed the crucifixion walked away from Golgotha stunned by a revelation.

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GARY KRIST

Classics Revisited

MODERN REVISIONS OF THE CLASSICS are nothing unusual these days, with each new season bringing us book and movie updates of everything from *King Lear* to *The Wizard of Oz*. Jane Austen, of course, has been surprisingly well served by the phenomenon—who would have thought that *Emma* would translate so entertainingly to Beverly Hills in the 1990s?—but Charles Dickens has had a more difficult time of it. The less said the better, for instance, about the recent movie modernization of *Great Expectations*, featuring Gwyneth Paltrow as Estella in the buff. But now, with the publication of *Jack Maggs* by the Australian Peter Carey, the old Victorian's luck seems to be changing.[1] This strong novel, Carey's sixth, is not so much a retelling of *Great Expectations* as a floor-to-ceiling renovation of it, with Carey seeming to adopt the general spirit of his model but twisting it in ingenious and sometimes even sinister ways. Don't look for even the bare outlines of the original plot architecture; Carey instead uses the story of the foundling Pip and his secret benefactor as little more than a springboard for a story of his own.

The book begins in high Dickensian style with the arrival in London of an intriguing stranger from the Dover coach:

> He was a tall man in his forties, so big in the chest and broad in the shoulder that his fellows on the bench seat had felt the strain of his presence, but what his occupation was, or what he planned to do in London, they had not the least idea. One privately imagined him a book-maker, another a gentleman farmer and a third, seeing the excellent quality of his waistcoat, imagined him an upper servant wearing his master's cast-off clothing.

But the man in question—Jack Maggs—is none of these things; he's an ex-convict, shipped to Australia in his youth for thievery, now returning to England incognito and at great risk to his life. Having made a fortune in the brickmaking business in the colony (the land he was given upon his conditional pardon proved to consist of an excellent clay), he has used his riches over the years to support and educate Henry Phipps, an orphan who once showed Maggs a tiny but significant kindness. Now Maggs has come to reap the rewards of his investment in respectability.

[1] JACK MAGGS, by *Peter Carey*. Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.

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He wants to find young Henry and bask in the sight of an English gentleman of his own creation.

The parallels here to Dickens' Magwitch and Pip are obvious, but just as obvious is Carey's intent to subvert his models. Phipps, for instance, is an arrogant, weak, and treacherous drunk who is not above raping a handsome footman—an entirely unredeemed version, in other words, of the original Pip. And Maggs, while infinitely more sympathetic, is nonetheless an ambiguous, post-Freudian figure, by turns menacing and sweet, knowing and naive, sentimental and psychotic. Moreover, these two find themselves in a London that is in no way the morally-ordered city of Dickens' novels, which was built on a harsh but reassuring schema of goodness and corruption. Carey's metropolis is a place of more troublesome half-shadows and nagging contradictions. It runs, like its predecessor, via the powerful engine of social climbing and self-interest, but the machinery here is far more tangled, far more complexly modern.

Maggs arrives in this inhospitable city as something of an innocent. Back in the harsh environment of his Australian prison, he sustained himself with an idealized dream of England, and of a kind of English respectability epitomized by one of the houses he had pilfered as a child-thief:

> The flies might feast on his spattered back; the double-cat might carry away the third and fourth fingers of his hand; but his mind crawled forward, always, constructing piece by piece the place wherein his eyes had first opened, the home to which he would one day return, not the mudflats of the Thames, nor Mary Britten's meat-rich room at Pepper Alley Stairs, but rather a house in Kensington whose kind and beautiful interior he had entered by tumbling down a chimney, like a babe falling from the outer darkness into light. Clearing the soot from his eyes he had seen that which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England and of Englishmen.

It doesn't take long, however, for Maggs to discover that this vision of England does not correspond with reality. The fine house in Kensington turns out to be no "kind and beautiful" island in an unkind, ugly world; in fact, as the events of the novel make clear, the English drawing room is no less brutal a place than the streets around Pepper Alley Stairs, even if its brutality is well hidden behind expensive draperies and polished furniture. And this discrepancy becomes the awful irony at the heart of *Jack Maggs*. The ideal of Englishness that nourished Maggs in his darkest years proves to be nothing but a sham, as bogus as the gentleman Henry Phipps. Civilization is a deeply ambiguous concept in Carey's London, since respectability, however desirable, must too often be won by means of scurrilousness, insensitivity, and cruelty.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the ex-convict cannot find his happiness within the borders of this fraudulent England. He must go

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elsewhere for that—back to Australia, far away from the supposed English gentleman who has been his own life's work. But in granting Maggs this long-withheld happiness, Carey makes his only serious miscalculation in the book. Tagging on an absurdly sudden, absurdly cheerful ending, he all but dynamites his novel in its last four pages. It's possible, of course, that this ending is meant as a last-minute tribute to the nineteenth-century master he's been respectfully subverting throughout the book. But whatever the motivation, it's an unfortunate conclusion to what is otherwise a work of great integrity and ingenuity.

Subversion is also the order of the day in *Night Train*, the new novel by Martin Amis, which takes place in a minor American city.[2] Billed as a "mystery" by its publisher, the book is anything but a traditional whodunit. It is, in fact, an anti-mystery—a mystery without a solution, or at least one whose solution is a mystery in itself. Never one to worry much about meeting readers' expectations, Amis has a wonderful time toying with the conventions of classic detective fiction, particularly the linguistic conventions of the hard-boiled *noir*, without providing any of the easy satisfactions that this particular genre is expected to provide. As a result, unsuspecting readers looking for a typical mystery are bound to come away from the book feeling befuddled, disappointed, or angry. Fortunately for the rest of us, however, *Night Train* offers exactly what we've come to expect from Amis in recent years—an innovative and sometimes infuriating read from an author who seems incapable of being uninteresting.

But first, the bad news. *Night Train* is narrated by "Mike" Hoolihan, a female American cop who is convincing neither as an American female nor as a cop. Amis has foisted off some shakily-realized characters before, but Mike is one of the shakiest. "I am a police," she says, in the very first line of the book. She goes on to explain that "a police," while an awkward-sounding construction to the general public, is what law enforcement professionals really call themselves. Well, maybe a generation ago, but the cops I asked claimed not to have heard that particular usage in years. And the eyebrow-raising inconsistencies go on from there. At times, the former homicide detective sounds like a street tough who switches verb tenses carelessly and starts her paragraphs with unsophisticated constructions like, "Right now I want to say something about myself and Colonel Tom." But by the end of that same paragraph, she's rising to an almost exalted eloquence: "I lay there trying to listen to her clear young voice, wondering if Jennifer was real or just another of the ghosts who occasionally stopped by, cool, self-sufficient, unreproachful figures, their faces carved and blue." Complicating matters, moreover, are the numerous Anglicisms ("flatmate," "spot of pain," etc.) that pepper her speech like so many clarinet blasts in a string quartet.

Fortunately, though, *Night Train* rises above these technical difficul-

[2] NIGHT TRAIN, by *Martin Amis*. Harmony Books. $20.00.

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ties. The plot begins with the suicide of Jennifer Rockwell, a beautiful astrophysicist with a seemingly perfect life. Her father, a career cop who suspects foul play (no other explanation makes sense to him), asks Mike to look into the case. What she finds in the course of her investigation are shards of explanations—problems at work, erratic sexual behavior, evidence of psychotropic medication use—all of which seem to corroborate the suicide story. But Mike suspects that this trail of evidence may have been manufactured—and not by some secret murderer (this is not a genre mystery novel, after all), but rather by Jennifer herself. The victim, in other words, kindly provided the world with a way of understanding her suicide—an explanation for the inexplicable. So Mike, who sees through this ruse, must face the prospect that Jennifer's death can never be understood, no matter how much evidence accrues. The solution to this mystery is not just unknown; it's unknowable.

This is a typically daring Amis ploy—to end a detective novel on such an ambiguous note—and I'm not sure it really works. Adducing a basic inscrutability in a central character is, in some ways, a violation of the novelist's responsibility, a washing of hands that some readers will consider artistically bankrupt. But Amis' ending does make a valid philosophical point. And when someone writes as engrossingly and entertainingly as Amis does here (despite the problems of voice), one can forgive him almost anything.

After Amis' almost perverse desire to frustrate reader expectations, it's refreshing to look at a novel that instead tries to deliver everything its audience is looking for—a little romance, a little murder, a little historical color—without venturing far from the well-trodden paths of its genre. Dorothy Sayers' *Thrones, Dominations*, the last of her Wimsey/Vane mysteries, is just that kind of book.[3] For those highbrows out there who shun this kind of literature, I should explain that Sayers wrote a particularly appealing series of detective novels in the 1930s starring Lord Peter Wimsey, her amateur sleuth from the aristocracy, and Harriet Vane, an intelligent and often stubborn mystery writer whom Wimsey once saved from a false charge of murder. The novels, while offering tidy mysteries for the two to solve, owe their status as classics mainly to the continuing romance of Lord Peter and Harriet, which proceeds over the course of several books from first meeting to courtship to marriage (after which, quite naturally, a dead body surfaces just in time to spice up their honeymoon). *Thrones, Dominations* picks up the story with the newlyweds returning from abroad to set up housekeeping in London. Left unfinished in 1936, the book has now been completed by Jill Paton Walsh, earning her the gratitude of all Sayers fans who had heard about the manuscript for years and were eager to see how the author (who moved on to other kinds of books in her last two decades) intended to proceed with the Wimsey/Vane relationship.

[3] THRONES, DOMINATIONS, by *Dorothy L. Sayers* and *Jill Paton Walsh*. St. Martin's Press. $23.95.

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The finished novel as published, however, is a disappointment, and it's difficult to know whom to blame. The publishers aren't saying why Sayers never finished the book, or how much of it she actually drafted herself, or which parts of it are hers and which are Walsh's. But I suspect that the original manuscript may have been something of a mess (which would explain the sixty-year lag in bringing it out into the world). Did Sayers realize that the book was subpar and abandon it? Granted, the completed version has its virtues; the gently teasing love-play of Peter and Harriet is almost as charming as ever, and some of the subsidiary characters are particularly well-drawn. But the book has some glaring problems. The mystery itself, for one thing, is extremely modest, with certain elements of the crime requiring more than the usual suspension of disbelief. And tone is a problem. The first hundred pages are disconcertingly chilly and unengaging, plagued by elliptical dialogue and abstract situations. Then, with the discovery of the body on page 113, the tone shifts dramatically, and we find ourselves on safer territory. People begin to talk to each other in a way that doesn't suggest that they are all overbred mannequins. The novel begins to breathe.

But the book is recognizably Sayers throughout—no small comfort to fans like me. And it even contains a little piquant literary criticism, including this delightful bit of dialogue:

> 'Detective stories contain a dream of justice. They project a vision of a world in which wrongs are righted, . . . murderers are caught and hanged, and innocent victims are avenged, and future murder is deterred.'
>
> 'But it is just a vision, Peter. The world we live in is not like that.'
>
> 'It sometimes is,' he said. 'Besides, hasn't it occurred to you that to be beneficent, a vision does not have to be true?'
>
> 'What benefits could be conferred by falsehood?' she asked.
>
> 'Not falsehood, Harriet; idealism. Detective stories keep alive a view of the world which ought to be true.'

I can think of few better ways of expressing the difference between the Sayers idea of the mystery story and that of Martin Amis. One is idealist; the other realist (however stylized). One provides comfort, the other provocation. And fortunately, there's room on the bookshelf for both.

An Ocean in Iowa, Peter Hedges's second novel (after the much less felicitously titled *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*), belongs to a classic genre of a different stripe—the quiet middle-American coming-of-age story.[4] Books of this type used to be printed in droves by American publishing houses, but they seem to have become rarer recently, no doubt because of a decrease in demand rather than supply (I suspect that every MFA student in the country has one or two in a desk drawer somewhere). And

[4] AN OCEAN IN IOWA, by *Peter Hedges*. Hyperion. $22.95.

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certainly, Peter Hedges does little to expand the genre's traditionally narrow scope. Scotty Ocean, his seven-year-old protagonist, passes through some stunningly familiar territory on his grand journey to adulthood, paying due homage to all of the iconic landmarks—from the first schoolyard kiss (made problematic by the kisser's braces) to the spectacle of a sister stuffing Kleenex into the cups of her training bra. Scotty even engages in the age-old practice of pulling the pigtails of the girl who sits next to him in school. Present, too, are the pop-culture references we've come to expect in novels of this type. Remember Twister? Spirographs? The opening credits of "Mission: Impossible"? Peter Hedges remembers, and he re-creates them here with all the care of a latter-day Margaret Mead.

What saves the book from being just another novel from a well-worn mold, however, is Hedges's almost frightening ability to put himself into the head of his young point-of-view character. He seems to know (or remember) precisely what it was like to be seven years old, navigating the minefield of a 1960s Iowa preadolescence. It's hardly an idyllic childhood he describes here—Scotty's mother, an alcoholic, abandons the family shortly after the boy's seventh birthday—and Hedges does an excellent job of showing how Scotty's sense of hurt is submerged and transformed by the bizarre logic of childhood, creating malignant undercurrents beneath the boy's sweet facade. For all the familiarity of the situations he depicts, Hedges has captured, as only a few other writers have, the sheer *weirdness* of the preadolescent mind, and that is no small accomplishment.

But the author is never able to steer entirely clear of a certain preciousness—something that may be almost inevitable, given material like this scene in which an older boy explains the mysteries of sex to Scotty (with help from the old trope of first base, second base, third base, home run):

> "Have you kissed anybody?"
>
> Scotty quickly replayed his kissing memories. "Carole Staley kissed me. Right here," he said, pointing to his elbow.
>
> "Gotta be on the lips, Ocean, for it to be first base."
>
> "Oh." Scotty remembered kissing his mother repeatedly and his sisters, too. "My mom and sisters—"
>
> "Mothers and sisters don't count."
>
> "Okay."
>
> "Now if I were to kiss one of your sisters . . . let's say Claire . . . if I were to kiss *Claire*, it would be first base. But if you were to kiss—"
>
> "It wouldn't count."
>
> "Right."

In scenes like this, *An Ocean in Iowa* threatens to turn into a print version of the cloyingly nostalgic TV series "The Wonder Years." Hedges is

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obviously a subtle writer with a real gift of sympathetic imagination, but in this book he could have used some fresher raw material.

A somewhat more exotic coming-of-age story is described in Nicholas Papandreou's *A Crowded Heart*.[5] Papandreou, the son and grandson of former Greek Prime Ministers (and the brother of a current member of the Greek Cabinet), appears to be something of a black sheep in this very political family. Having studied economics and literature, he worked as an economist at the World Bank before turning to full-time writing. But if *A Crowded Heart*, his first novel, is any indication, his life has been touched as deeply as anyone's by the politics that has swirled around this family for a century. Clearly autobiographical, the novel gives us brief glimpses into the life of a young boy named Alex, who must weather the vicissitudes of his father's changing political fortunes. "The sound of the crowd is the sound of my life," Alex writes early in the book, and from his perspective we see the effects on the family of every stage in his father's very public career—adulation, imprisonment, exile, electoral failure, and, finally, political ascendancy.

While *A Crowded Heart* is not as tightly crafted a book as *An Ocean in Iowa*, it benefits from a less fussy, more expansive world-view. Alex experiences the normal passages of any childhood, but these are suffused by the broader concerns of politics. And Papandreou communicates this blurring of the line between home and the world with an often funny light-handedness:

> After my father's arrest the good people of Greece no longer showed up on our doorstep. Few dared come to a political prisoner's home. The only kids my mother got to come for my eleventh birthday were those whose fathers were already in jail.

This is a family with a sense of history and of its own place in that history. For a boy more inclined to reading poems than leading nations, it can be a difficult clan to belong to, and relations are not always easy between Alex and his father. But even the personal conflicts that erupt between them find expression through the medium of politics:

> "You know what, Dad?" I heard a great crashing sound like the rush of water over the Niagara Falls. "I'm glad the dictators didn't fall! Do you hear? I'm glad! Glad!" Something had got into me and wouldn't let go. I stopped the car right in the middle of the road. A car honked. "I'm glad they're torturing people! I'm glad the working class always loses! I'm glad Trotsky was assassinated! I'm glad Stalin won and you can preach to me all you like, I'm still going to be glad! Long live capitalism! You hear me Dad? Long live capitalism!" I glared at him and folded my arms across my chest.

[5] A CROWDED HEART, by *Nicholas Papandreou*. Picador. $21.00.

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Against a father like this one, "Long live capitalism!" is a salvo guaranteed to draw more blood than the usual mundane melodrama of "Dad, I don't love you, and I never did," etc. etc.

Vividly though simply written, *A Crowded Heart* is less a novel than a series of loosely-connected vignettes. It's a little shorter than it should be (how many books can you say *that* about?), but Papandreou still finds room in it for some marvelous set pieces, like the funeral scene in which the deceased's mother vaults into the open casket and refuses to get out. And, of course, the book has the unfair advantage of being set largely in Greece—a fact that Papandreou, wisely, takes full advantage of:

> To describe Greece I would share with you a tomato on the sandy beaches of Skopellos, open a sea urchin with my penknife and serve you the scarlet eggs inside while the salt stretches the skin on our backs. We would bodysurf on white waves in the day and soak up the moonlight at night. I would dry you a starfish and hang it on your wall so you could smell the salty Aegean in your room, and ask you to breathe in the aroma of osier, broom and ginger root . . .

That kind of writing may edge dangerously close to the idiom of the travel brochure, but it would take a critic far more curmudgeonly than I am to resist *A Crowded Heart*'s numerous charms.

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BRUCE BAWER

Ring-a-Ding-Ding

"THE RICH," F. SCOTT FITZGERALD ONCE OBSERVED, "are different from you and me." Maybe, maybe not. But in this Age of Celebrity, the rich are of far less interest—and unquestionably far less different—than the famous. After all, being different, when you're a celebrity, is part of the job description. We live through our men and women of fame. We *want* them to be luminous, glamourous, bigger than life—except that we're irked when they act as if they are, and delighted when, running into them in the real world, we see them doing ordinary things, and looking just like one of us.

Several years ago I resided for a few months in a thin-walled, L-shaped walk-up on East 49th Street in Manhattan that was three stories up from a Japanese whorehouse. It was not a particularly classy dwelling, which is why it stunned me to discover that I lived right down the street from Miss Katharine Hepburn. Often, while walking home, weighed down with grocery bags or ten or twelve books from the Mid-Manhattan Library, I would catch a glimpse of the lioness in winter herself—the onetime Tracy Lord, Mary of Scotland, Tess Harding, Rose Sayre, and Eleanor of Aquitaine—stepping out of the door of her townhouse to drop a bag in her garbage can, which was at sidewalk level just inside a waist-high fence. I never spoke to her—I had nothing to say that she hadn't heard a million times—but I got a kick out of knowing that she was, sort of, a neighbor. Aside from having seen her on Broadway in a lame play called *West Side Waltz*, I'd crossed her path on a couple of other occasions over the years—once at Kennedy Airport, where I caught sight of her refusing help as she lifted an immense suitcase off a carousel, and once at Western Costume in Los Angeles, where while waiting for a friend in the lobby I heard her unmistakable voice through a half-open door and peeked in to glimpse her with Edith Head, trying on a costume for what turned out to be *Rooster Cogburn*. Like everyone else on the planet, I admired Hepburn not only for her acting but for the youthful energy and optimism that she displayed even when she had passed the summertime of her years and for the fact that she did little things that big celebrities weren't supposed to do, like tote her own luggage and toss out her own trash.

Knowing Hepburn and Other Curious Experiences by James Prideaux—who wrote three formulaic TV movies in which Hepburn starred during the late 1980s and early 1990s—is a sort of book-length version of the

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above paragraph.[1] Prideaux has apparently put on record every last time the Great Lady so much as cleared her throat in his presence. One has to admire his ingenuity. Would anybody buy—or publish—the memoirs of an obscure TV and stage writer? Unlikely. But Prideaux has packaged the story of his career by focusing on his relationship with Hepburn. There are, to be sure, side trips here into his dealings with Elizabeth Taylor, Dame Judith Anderson, Angela Lansbury, Jean Stapleton, and Dame Wendy Hiller, among others (Prideaux, who comes off here as something of a platonic Stage Door Johnny, has specialized in churning out TV and theater vehicles for actresses who have completed most of their long day's journey into night), but he keeps coming back to Hepburn, whom he calls Kate—though I've always understood that her real intimates call her Kathy—and whom he claims to adore (though this portrait, while not without love, sometimes reads less like a *billet doux* than a bill of divorcement).

The value of Prideaux's book lies chiefly in its meticulous documentation of mostly unsensational and mostly private moments in the life of someone who exists entirely, one might say, inside the fact of her stardom. For the principal verity of Hepburn's life is that she is incredibly famous and that this makes her experience of life essentially different from yours or mine. Even as she insists on her own independence and self-sufficiency and prides herself on her occasional willingness to perform banal household tasks, Hepburn receives special treatment in virtually every social or professional circumstance, can make extraordinary demands and have them met instantly, is in a position to surround herself day and night with assorted handlers and hangers-on who will indulge her whims and tolerate her excesses, and can count on the fact that total strangers will provide more than a little ministration if needed and smile sweetly at her violations of propriety simply because she is who she is. To say all this is not to criticize Hepburn; it is merely to describe what it means to be a superstar.

Prideaux's own take on Hepburn is inconsistent. He criticizes the little woman for her big ego—that inevitable corollary of stardom—yet sings her praises in absurdly inflated terms: "we have no heroes anymore and she's that. Maybe the last of them. People look up to her as a woman who has known her own mind and lived by her own rules, but with intelligence and dignity and taste. . . . She had the biggest ego of anyone I've ever known and yet there was that astonishing empathy with other people, looking outside herself, caring about things." To find this passage ridiculous is not to deny Hepburn's positive character traits but to note that we live in a time when fame is routinely confused with heroism, and that Prideaux's own portrait of her suggests convincingly that Hepburn has consistently put her own career and comfort first.

If James Prideaux thinks that Katharine Hepburn is our last hero,

[1] KNOWING HEPBURN AND OTHER CURIOUS EXPERIENCES, by *James Prideaux*. Faber and Faber, Inc. $14.95p.

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Shirley MacLaine, on the occasion of Frank Sinatra's passing, lamented that "we have lost a part of our capacity to self-reflect because Frank is gone." With that sobering thought in mind, let's turn to *The Way You Wear Your Hat: Frank Sinatra and the Lost Art of Livin'*,[2] in which Bill Zehme (an *Esquire* writer) does his best to steer clear of Sinatra as singer and actor and focuses instead on Sinatra the sage repository of wisdom about life. The operating assumption of this lavishly illustrated tome, never questioned, is that Old Blue Eyes was indeed a repository of such wisdom, and that the way he led his life—and, for that matter, the way he wore his hat (a Cavanaugh snap-brim)—is admirable and worth emulating.

Zehme is highly selective, bringing together only stories that (in his view) reflect well on the saloon singer from New Jersey. Some may find it rather challenging to reconcile Sinatra's habit of describing women as "broads," "chicks," etc., and of treating them like interior decoration with his claim to harbor a deep regard for the female sex. Not Zehme. As evidence of Sinatra's esteem for women, Zehme points out that Frank was known to slug guys for being insufficiently chivalrous. Indeed, one of the character traits Zehme invites us to admire about Frank is his readiness to slug guys—or to threaten to have their legs broken—as payback for their lack of gallantry. Deep down, Zehme wants us to understand, Sinatra was a moralist, a gentleman of the old school who believed in doffing his Cavanaugh snap-brim when a lady entered the Royal Presence—and who might well have had one of his boys work you over if you failed to do the same.

Why does this book exist? "For decades," Zehme explains, "lost men on bar stools would ask themselves the eternal drunken question: 'What would Frank do?' But nobody ever asked Frank." Eager to remedy this oversight, Zehme fired off a litany of queries about Life whose answers—scribbled in the wee small hours by the Chairman of the Board himself—formed the basis for this Celebrity Age Dhammapada. Some sample Q. & A.:

> "What's the rule in covering for a friend?" "Never rat on a rat."
> "What is the most offensive thing that can happen to a martini?" "Warm vodka. There's nothing worse."
> "What should a man never do in the presence of a woman?" "Yawn."

Apart from these instructive pointers in the direction of His Way (not to be confused with the Way of the Cross or the Buddha's Middle Way), *The Way You Wear Your Hat* consists mostly of anecdotes about Frank and information about his women, his buddies, and his taste in everything from shoes to—yes—hats. And, unsurprisingly, liquor; Zehme devotes several pages to Sinatra's partiality toward whiskey and to meticulous

[2] THE WAY YOU WEAR YOUR HAT: Frank Sinatra and the Lost Art of Livin', by *Bill Zehme*. HarperCollins. $23.00.

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descriptions of exactly how he told Joe to set 'em up ("always three or four ice cubes, two fingers of Jack Daniel's, the rest water, in a traditional rocks glass"). Alternating with tales of Frank's heavily lubricated shenanigans with Dean, Sammy, et al., are anecdotes about his largesse—his practice of paying his cronies' hospital bills and of slipping hundred-dollar bills to parking attendants. The book reads in part like something you might keep by your bar and in part like a compendium of evidence prepared to demonstrate to the College of Cardinals the crooner's qualifications for sainthood. Most of all, however, Zehme offers a male wet dream of absolute freedom and power, of pleasure without responsibility and bullying without consequences. Reading this book, mere mortals can imagine themselves ring-a-ding-dinging their way through life just like Old Blue Eyes—breezing from Jilly's to Toots Shor's, or for that matter floating down to Peru at the drop of a Cavanaugh snap-brim, a cohort of "pallies" on hand and a tight roll of C-notes at the ready to slap into the palms of compliant showgirls and toadying busboys.

To read Prideaux and Zehme back-to-back is to marvel at the similarities between celebrities as seemingly unalike as Hepburn and Sinatra. Both were capable of extraordinary acts of generosity as well as of a cruel, condescending abusiveness that no one but a star, a dictator, or a tenured professor could get away with. Celebrities on the order of a Kate or a Frank know that they electrify a room when they enter it—and they use that power the way ordinary people breathe. Which is, again, not necessarily to put down these two individuals, or anyone else, and certainly not to deny the extraordinary quality of their talent, but simply to characterize what it means to live inside the fact of stardom, however richly deserved or undeserved.

Part of what it means to say that we live in an Age of Celebrity is that the Hollywood "star system" now has its counterparts in other fields. It's scarcely a stretch, for example, to describe the late critic Clement Greenberg (1909–94) as the Sinatra of modern art—the Chairman of the Board of the New York art scene, the Voice of abstract expressionism and color-field painting. Like Zehme's book, Florence Rubenfeld's *Clement Greenberg: A Life* is full of anecdotes about her subject bullying guys, bedding and discarding starry-eyed women, and generally throwing his weight around—and getting away with every bit of it because of who he was.[3] Like the singer from Hoboken, the critic from the Bronx was a first-generation American, pampered by his immigrant mama, who parlayed his talent into power and (on an art-world scale, anyway) celebrity. His egocentrism was certainly of a Sinatran order: he managed to find a school of psychoanalytical therapy that not only permitted but exalted the kind of extreme self-indulgence in which he, like Old Blue Eyes, specialized.

Greenberg's is a mixed legacy. Widely identified with high serious-

[3] CLEMENT GREENBERG: A Life, by *Florence Rubenfeld*. Scribner. $30.00.

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ness, critical rigor, and meticulous aesthetic discrimination, he is detested by Andy Warhol's kitsch-happy art-world heirs and revered by many opponents of the soup-can revolution who see the two men as *symbols of diametrically opposing ways of thinking about art. Yet in fact* Greenberg, by promoting a select few artists (among them Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning) so assiduously that they would come to be universally recognized as "stars," played a key role in delivering the art scene over, bag and baggage, to the culture of celebrity, and thus helped usher in the post-Warhol era, in which aesthetic merit takes a back seat to buzz, spin, hype, image, glamour, and personality. Just as Mayer, Zukor, Goldwyn, the Warners, and other early-twentieth-century film moguls created Hollywood stardom, then, Greenberg was instrumental, two generations later, in saddling the art world with its own star system.

Rubenfeld capably recounts Greenberg's numerous marriages and dalliances, friendships and feuds; while admiring his eloquence and his famed "eye" for art, she acknowledges his extraordinary failings of character. Yet though she paints a vivid portrait of the critic as repulsive, ruthless tyrant, she seems perhaps insufficiently troubled by the deleterious ways in which the decidedly inclement Greenberg—for whom power seems to have been supremely important—influenced art in our time. To read her book is to be reminded how quickly and thoroughly the celebrity-culture mentality came to dominate the world of high art, how profoundly deplorable a development this has been, and how ironic it is that one of the chief culprits in this sad chapter of art history was a critic who presented himself as a champion of impersonal judgment and objective merit.

Like the art world, the literary world, too, has its celebrities. Peter Manso compiled an oral biography of one of them, Norman Mailer, some years back; now Mailer's fellow celebrity novelist Truman Capote has received the oral-bio treatment from George Plimpton, himself a writer-celebrity who, given the scores of literary interviews that he has published in his magazine, *Paris Review*, and given as well the oral biographies of Robert Kennedy and Edie Sedgwick that he's done in collaboration with Jean Stein, may justifiably be described as our leading practitioner of the art (craft?) of representing the spoken word on the page.[4]

The underlying assumption of conventional biographies is that a serious, dedicated writer can sift through sources and arrive at a worthwhile approximation of the objective truth about another person's life; the justification for oral biographies is the realization (1) that the life of a complex person who has left friends and enemies in profusion must always remain to some extent a *Rashomon* experience and (2) that celebrity gossip is, frankly, entertaining. To his credit, Plimpton gives a

[4] TRUMAN CAPOTE: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career. by *George Plimpton.* Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. $35.00.

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generous plug to Gerald Clarke's splendid "official biography" of Capote, while pitching his own book as a less solemn enterprise in which "the reader is treated to information firsthand, as if one had happened in on a large gathering, perhaps a cocktail party of Truman Capote's acquaintances. With a glass in hand (probably a vodka) our reader moves from group to group and listens in on personal reminiscences, opinions, vitriol, and anecdote." A book like *Truman Capote* is to a conventional biography as some Internet news sources are to the mainstream press: Plimpton prints gossip that may strike many readers as dubious and offers different versions of a single incident without intruding to provide direction or exert judgment.

Among the highlights: Carol Marcus Matthau tells how the young Capote was fired by *The New Yorker* after he turned in an honest "Talk of the Town" piece about a seminar given by Robert Frost: "He thought Frost was a big pompous ass and that it was pathetic to see everyone hanging on his every word." Mailer describes going into a tough working-class bar with the flamboyant Capote. Mailer was nervous, Capote wasn't: "I was very impressed with what it cost him to live." Slim Keith recalls Capote saying, "I'm a freak. People don't love me. People are fascinated by me, but people don't love me." Eleanor Perényi testifies—convincingly—that Capote "was exactly like Warhol in that he knew *nothing*. Absolutely nothing. He had no form of culture. He didn't know anything about European literature. The *idea* that he was going to be Proust [in his unfinished novel *Answered Prayers*]—I mean, this is again part of the pitifulness of his claim. He never looked at a piece of architecture; he never looked at a painting; he never went to an art gallery. . . . I think that's a reason that his writing collapsed. He really had nothing to build on in the end. He was just an empty, silly little man sitting around in Mona Williams's villa on Capri—that kind of thing." This rings at least partly true, and explains a lot. (Yet how, then, to explain the utter beauty of his prose?)

John Barry Ryan makes a key point: "If you were doing a book on celebrity and you really wondered how did society turn into the jet set and how did the jet set turn into whatever god-awful mishmash we presently [*sic*] have that passes for the front page of *People* magazine fodder, Truman played a role in that." Indeed, if Gerald Clarke's biography stresses Capote as literary figure, Plimpton focuses—just as legitimately—on Capote as celebrity. And Plimpton's form serves his function. There is little here on Capote's masterly *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but several chapters on his famous Black-and-White Ball, which emerges as a crucial event in the shaping of late-twentieth-century celebrity culture out of the worlds of high finance, politics, showbiz, and café society. To read Plimpton's chapters on the legendary soirée is to recognize that he provides something here that Clarke doesn't—namely, an insider's savvy about the uptown and downtown Manhattan subcultures in which Capote moved and had his being.

Many observers have suggested that it was Capote's seduction by the

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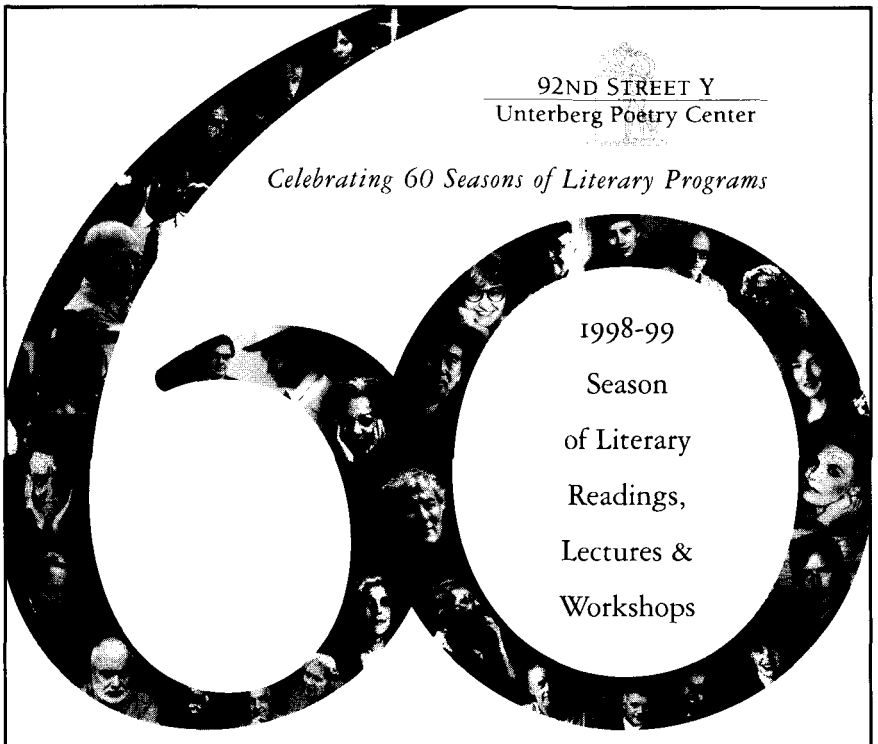

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famous—and by his own fame—that caused him to produce so little in his later years and hastened his death. Yet his friend John Knowles demurs: "Celebrity was absolutely essential to him. I do not think he would have survived as long as he did without it." Indeed, it may well be that Capote's writing career was motivated principally not by literary compulsion of the sort that drives most serious writers, but by a craving for fame. Could it be that that's why Capote stopped writing when he did—because he had already gotten as famous as anyone could get?

Every so often there's an exception to the rules, even when it comes to celebrities. Take William Haines. Readers who think they know something about movies but have never heard his name may be surprised to learn that Haines—the subject of William J. Mann's beautifully written new biography *Wisecracker*—was the nation's #1 box-office star in 1930.[5] Mann's book is subtitled *The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star*, but it must be emphasized that while Haines (b. 1900), who rose to fame in silent comedies, didn't hide his homosexuality from friends and colleagues, he was not *publicly* gay; on the contrary, he went along with the fiction—perpetrated by studio publicists and disseminated by gossip columnists—that he seriously dated women. Yet (and here's where the exception comes in) when the film business turned more conservative during the Great Depression and other gay stars knuckled under to studio pressure by jettisoning their same-sex lovers and retreating into false-front heterosexual marriages, Haines—whose career had thrived amid the "new morality" (that is, the sexual freedom and openness) of 1920s Hollywood—chose instead to shed stardom and to live openly with his longtime companion, Jimmie Shields. (They remained a couple until Haines's death in 1973.)

Joan Crawford, a friend from Haines's early days in silent movies who remained staunchly loyal to him until his death, comes out in this book smelling like a rose (no wire hangers here), but a dismaying number of other showbiz figures—among them Gary Cooper, Ramon Novarro, Barbara Stanwyck, and Robert Taylor—emerge as models of pusillanimity. Homosexuals all, each sacrificed integrity (to some extent) for fame. In rich detail, Mann depicts the varying consequences in their lives of "playing the game": for some it brought success; for some, tragedy; for some, both. First among those who, in Mann's telling, gained the whole world but lost his soul is Cary Grant, who under studio pressure dropped his longtime lover Randolph Scott and, in the years that followed, descended into "surliness and abusive behavior in his private life," moving from one bad marriage to another, even as his star continued to rise. "The once carefree and gay young man who first came to Hollywood in 1932," writes Mann, "was nowhere to be found." Haines,

[5] WISECRACKER: The Life and Times of William Haines, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star, by *William J. Mann*. Viking. $29.95.

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who had known the onetime Archie Leach when they were teenagers together in Greenwich Village, dismissed him in later years as a "phony."

Mann's excursions into the lives of Grant and other Hollywood homosexuals (the supporting cast here also includes George Cukor, Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, and Clifton Webb) make it not only an illuminating biography of a forgotten star but an evocative—and valuable—history of the elite gay circles in mid-century Tinseltown that provided the setting for much of Haines's adult life. And it also, as Mann notes, tells "the story of the institutionalization of the Hollywood closet, a tradition that has persisted for more than fifty years. It is the story of how an industry changed, how a community of artists and free thinkers and individualists turned its back on its own in the face of organized, traditionalist pressure. Those who played the game were rewarded with stardom, endurance, and protection. . . . Those who refused—people like [director] Dorothy Arzner and Billy Haines—were ushered out." No one, to my knowledge, has ever told this story so effectively.

To his credit, Mann does not claim too much for William Haines. The actor, who in his last years socialized with Nancy Reagan but apparently said nothing to protest her husband's antigay rhetoric, was something less than a consummate gay activist. Nonetheless he emerges from these pages as a generally admirable and even inspiring figure who, in the midst of a subculture awash in cowardice, insisted on living his life on his own terms. And what is most fascinating and impressive of all is the ease with which he relinquished his celebrity. Though Haines became one of the nation's better-known interior decorators, he never again enjoyed the fame he had known as a film star. Somehow this seems not to have bothered him very much, if at all. Plainly, other things—among them self-respect and self-determination—mattered far more to him than celebrity. How, one wonders, did this happen? Why was Haines so different in this regard from other stars, one after another of whom gave up their very selves, it would appear, in order to cling to fame? To study the choices made by other movie stars, both in his time and in ours, is to realize what a rare bird he really was. It's just not *supposed* to be so easy to walk away from the limelight.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN WEIGHTMAN,* Professor Emeritus, London University, is the author of *The Concept of the Avant-Garde* (Alcove Press). . . . A Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, GEORGE WATSON recently published *The Lost Literature of Socialism*. . . . DAVID MASON has joined the English Department of The Colorado College. With John Frederick Nims, he is completing the fourth edition of *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*. . . . JOHN McCORMICK* is working on a book of essay-memoirs called *All's Well That Ends*. . . . BERT O. STATES's "My Slight Stoop" (*The Hudson Review*, Autumn 1997 issue) reappears in the current *Anchor Essay Annual: Best of 1998*. . . . WILMER MILLS* lives in Sewanee, Tennessee, where he works as a woodworker and operates a sawmill. . . . DICK DAVIS,* a professor of Persian at Ohio State University, recently published a book of poems, *Touchwood* (Anvil Press). . . . ALAN SULLIVAN's* first chapbook, *New Tricks*, was published in 1998 by Somers Rocks Press. . . . PETER MAKUCK, editor of *Tar River Poetry*, is the author most recently of *Against Distance* (BOA Editions).

MICHAEL LIND's* epic poem *The Alamo* was named one of the Best Books of 1997 by the *Los Angeles Times*. . . . ROBIN S. CHAPMAN's *Learning to Talk* (Fireweed Press) is her most recent collection of poems. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS has just been named a John and Rebecca Moores Scholar at the University of Houston, where he teaches creative writing. . . . FLOYD SKLOOT's most recent book is the novel *The Open Door* (Story Line Press, 1997). . . . JAMES BAKER HALL's new book of poems, *The Mother on the Other Side of the World*, will be published by Sarabande. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities* has been selected as a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate. . . . BERT CARDULLO is at work on *Theatre of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology* for Yale University Press. . . . THOMAS M. DISCH's latest book is *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (Free Press). . . . ALFRED CORN teaches in the Graduate Writing Division of Columbia University. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ spent last year as a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, England. . . . Among JOHN HAINES's most recent books are *Fables and Distances, New and Selected Essays* (1996) and *A Guide to the Four-Chambered Heart* (1996). . . . LOUIS SIMPSON's *Modern Poets of France: A Bilingual Anthology* (Story Line Press) won the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award given by the Academy of American Poets. . . . GARY KRIST's most recent book is *Bad Chemistry* (Random House), a novel. . . . BRUCE BAWER's film criticism has been collected in *The Screenplay's the Thing*. His book *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (Crown Publishers) was named by *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, and amazon.com as one of the best books of 1997; it will appear in paperback from Three Rivers Press.

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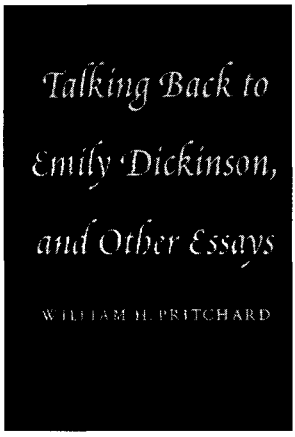

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